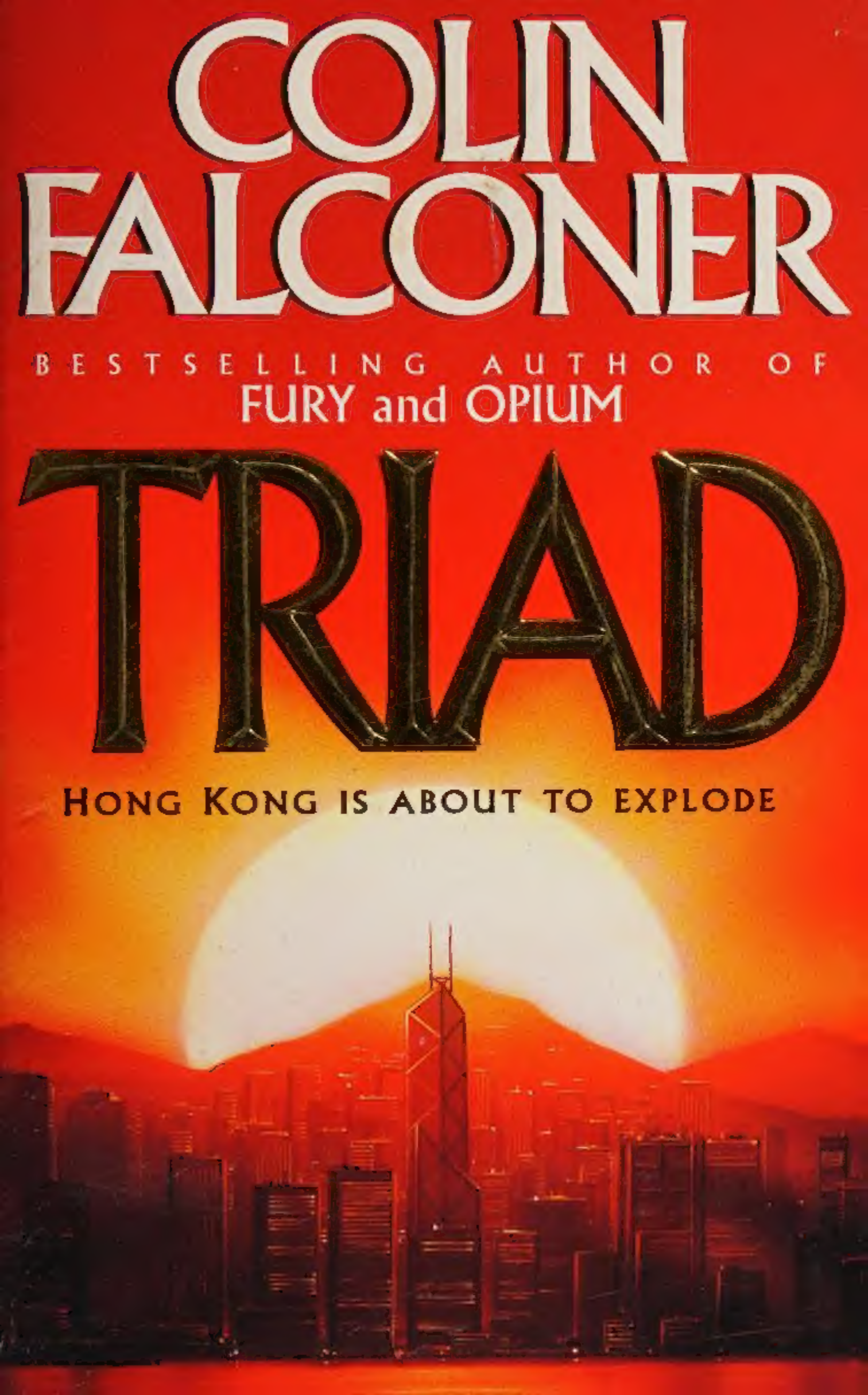
COLIN FALCONER

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
FURY and OPIUM

TRIAD

HONG KONG IS ABOUT TO EXPLODE



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Also by the same author
and available from Coronet:

Venom
Deathwatch
Harem
Fury
Opium

About the Author

Colin Falconer was born in London in 1953. He is a journalist and has written for many national magazines and newspapers. He has travelled widely in Europe and South-East Asia and now lives in Western Australia. He is the author of five acclaimed thrillers, all available in Coronet paperback: *Venom, Deathwatch, Harem, Fury* and *Opium*.

TRIAD

Colin Falconer

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This book is for John Chetwynd-Chatwin
and for Trevor Collins.
With many thanks.

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Finally . . . my thanks to Co-suk. For all the Trouble.

O pardon me thou bleeding piece of earth that I am meek and gentle with these butchers

Shakespeare

PROLOGUE

Berkeley, San Francisco

John Keelan's life, world and family were shattered at three minutes past six on a spring evening in Berkeley.

He was in the kitchen feeding his baby daughter a bowl of pumpkin that his wife had puréed in the food processor. Keelan knew she wouldn't eat it, but he went along with the charade anyway. Anna was determined for her daughter to eat only healthy natural foods, another of her endearing fads, like tai chi and aromatherapy.

But he also knew that Caroline wasn't going to be fooled by the beguiling colour of stewed pumpkin. Even at eleven months she already had a prejudice for Heinz chocolate pudding. As Keelan spooned the first mouthful in, she twisted her hot-cheeked cherubic face into a grimace and sprayed it back over his hand.

'Caroline, that is not being a good girl for Daddy,' he said, as the gunman stepped onto the path.

It was dusk, lights had flickered on along the suburban street, the ghostly blue glimmer of television sets could be seen where the curtains were not yet drawn for the evening. There was a spatter of rain on the windows and branches rustled against the panes, masking the footfall in the shrubbery.

'Look, I know it's scummy stuff. But your mother made it, just for you. Let's humour her, okay?'

Caroline allowed Keelan to get the spoon right to her lips, but her jaw was clamped tight. At the last moment she took a deep breath and blew. Her compressed lips made a raspberry and the pumpkin sprayed over the high chair, the floor, and on his shirt.

'Now look what you've done.'

While he sponged the pumpkin off his shirt at the sink, Caroline smeared the pumpkin around the high chair tray and then greased it through her hair. He thought he heard someone coming up the path but at that moment Caroline gave a high-pitched shriek. She had poked herself in the eye with her finger.

Keelan took her out of the high chair to comfort her. When she quietened, he put her back. He looked down at his shirt. It was the colour of pumpkin.

This wasn't getting either of them anywhere. 'Anna, she really doesn't want this pumpkin,' he shouted through the open door.

'You haven't even tried.'

'She wants to call her lawyer.'

'It's not in her best interests. Or yours. What she doesn't want, you get for tea.'

Keelan looked at his daughter. 'You hear that? Now are you going to be sensible or do I have to get rough with you?'

Caroline strained hard and a farting noise came from her diaper. Keelan put down the pumpkin. 'Hey, why don't I just tip this stuff straight in your pants and then we'll both be happy?'

The weapon was a .38 Smith and Wesson Magnum, fitted with a silencer and loaded with six Super-vel hollow points designed to expand and distort inside a human body. It was not the assassin's own weapon. It had been obtained for him two weeks before, stolen in a gunshop heist in San Diego. Its serial number had been removed and it was completely untraceable.

Keelan put some of the pumpkin in his mouth, to demonstrate to his daughter that it was edible. 'Look, it's great. See. I know it looks poisonous, but it's not. Trust me.'

He held out the spoon.

The assassin stopped around the side of the house. He took a pair of black leather gloves from the pocket of his zippered jacket and put them on. Then he unzipped the jacket and took

the revolver from the waistband of his jeans, and screwed the silencer on the end of the barrel.

He walked to the kitchen window.

Keelan was trying to convince Caroline that the spoon was an aeroplane. It circled twice, then came in for landing. At the last moment Caroline turned her head away and the stewed pumpkin went down her neck. Keelan dropped the spoon on the tray in frustration.

'Anna, she really doesn't want this pumpkin!'

'Try her with some mashed banana.'

Keelan stood up. He saw a shadow at the kitchen window.

There was a bang, glass splintering, and the bowl crashed to the floor. Keelan tried to throw his body towards Caroline. But his legs would not respond and he lurched sideways across the kitchen. He heard a second shot, a sound like a champagne cork being pulled out of a bottle, and a part of him, the professional policeman. recognised the sound.

He collided with the wall. There was blood smeared under the palm of his hand. He realised he had been shot. He looked back at Caroline. She was laughing.

She thought he was playing.

He saw Anna's face in the doorway. Her eyes were wide in terror, her mouth frozen open, perhaps trying to shout something, perhaps just open in surprise. He tried to shout at her to get out of the kitchen, grab Caroline and get out, but then the pain hit him. It was as if someone had jammed a pitchfork into his body, just under the ribs. He lurched forward and fell onto the hallway carpet, brought his knees up to his chest to try and stop the pain. He heard Anna screaming, a shrill piercing scream that seemed to echo right around the world.

He did not hear the other four shots. The pain had made him vomit, and when that first spasm passed, everything had turned white and he had to screw up his eyes against the glare. He could not hear or see, and the black borders of the world raced towards him.

* * *

None of John Keelan's neighbours remembered hearing the shots, or seeing anyone running from his house. But they heard Anna's screams and immediately called the police. A radio car patrolling nearby skidded onto the lawn just two minutes later. When the two uniformed policeman could not get an answer at the front door, they ran around the side of the house. A few moments later one of them ran back to the radio car to request back-up and an emergency medical team.

Keelan carried with him only the ghostly outlines of memory. He remembered being placed in a vehicle, and hearing a siren a very long way off. The movement of the vehicle sent great currents of agony through his body. There was a mask over his face and there was the strong smell of plastic. He felt the cool trace of gas under his nose. Oxygen, a part of him realised. How many times had he seen this ritual performed on some other human wreck?

Several times he tried to speak but he could not hear the sound of his own voice. Each time he blinked his eyes the world seemed to disappear for a long time. Suddenly he was lying on a gurney, fluorescent lights shining straight into his face. A doctor was cutting off his trousers and shouting instructions. Figures in green gowns swam in and out his vision, their shapes distorted by the blinding lights. There was a bottle suspended above his head and an intravenous tube led from the bottle to a vein in his arm. Red digital figures pulsed on and off on a machine that had been placed close to his head. Someone was asking him about the pain.

He didn't care about the pain. All he could think about was Anna and Caroline.

Bullets do not travel in a straight line inside the human body. The soft cone pancakes on impact, dicing the soft tissues and organs it comes into contact with, ricocheting around body cavities like a pinball. The bullet that struck John Keelan entered just above his navel, destroyed part of his liver, followed the contours of his rib cage and lodged near his spine. The massive haemorrhaging caused by this injury required the urgent infusion of twelve litres of plasma. He

stopped breathing twice in the trauma unit and had to be resuscitated. A priest was summoned to administer the last rites as he lay in the post-op room.

Surgeons removed three inches of his small bowel and he lost the function of fifteen per cent of his liver. He lay in a coma for five days. He regained consciousness the day of Anna and Caroline's funeral.

He spent the next ninety-seven days in hospital and lost twenty kilos in weight.

But he was there in court nine and a half months later when the son of the man who had ordered his execution stood trial on RICO charges pursuant to the Title III investigations he had been responsible for. He listened as the trial judge ruled that the investigation had violated the defendant's rights under the Fourth Amendment and that there was therefore no case to answer.

The man was led from the court, surrounded by his expensive lawyers and his minders, to a barrage of media attention. Keelan stayed behind, staring, numb. After a while he realised someone was standing at the end of the aisle watching him. He looked up.

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PART ONE

We have every respect for persons entertaining strict religious principles, but we fear that very godly people are not suited to the drug trade.

James Matheson
co-founder of Jardine Matheson

1

Hong Kong

The trawler was lit by just two pale lamps, green on the port and red to starboard, and the dull glow of a pressure lamp in the poop. Another, larger vessel, drifted away from her, also showing just her riding lights. Less than a mile distant the heaving swells of the South China Sea thundered against unseen cliffs.

The *Chung Yang* had motored to her rendezvous point, just outside Chinese and Hong Kong waters, in the lee of an uninhabited spine of rock known as Fat Chui island. Now, with the transfer completed, Li Kam-chuen ordered his crew to take up anchor and charted a course north for the Soko islands and the Hong Kong square boundary.

The old man hawked deep in his throat to frighten the Spit Poison god, and deposited a glob of mucus on the deck. He prayed that tonight Chi Kung, god of gamblers, was sitting on his shoulders. In the hold beneath his feet was two hundred kilos of white powder from Burma. Safely delivered to Hong Kong, it would be worth a million Hong Kong dollars to Li, enough for this old fisherman to send both his sons to university in America.

The wind gusted over a churning sea. The night was as black as the insides of a bear. Not even a sliver of moon. A few miles to port lay the vast Pearl River estuary, to starboard the major sea lanes, the riding lights of great ships blinking in the darkness. May all gods concentrate on his passage tonight! One more trip was all he needed, then he would sell his trawler and spend the rest of his life playing checkers in the temple with enough money and respect for ten lifetimes!

High in the poop of the old trawler Li turned away from the wheel for a moment to pinch both nostrils and clear his nose. He checked his watch in the flicker of the pressure lamp. With joss they would reach Aberdeen harbour just before dawn, with the rest of the fishing fleet and . . .

He heard something on the port side.

Dew neh loh moh!

He strained to hear over the throb of the motors. His eyes searched the darkness. Nothing. The distant beat of the waves against the island, the chatter of his crew.

Just his imagination.

He lit a cigarette.

A long swell lifted the junk. Like the curved spine of a great dragon passing underneath them. He shuddered.

They had rounded the tip of the island now, its inky outlines silhouetted against the sombre dark of the overcast, at its base the phosphorescence of breaking surf. Li felt a sudden coldness in the pit of his belly. His ancestors whispered to him that something was wrong.

The same sound again, the whine of a motor, there for a moment then gone, lost to the wind. He searched the horizon for lights, tried to identify the direction of the sound.

Nothing.

You are an old woman, he thought. You would imagine dragons in a bowl of noodles!

There it was again.

This time his crew heard it as well. His brother and brother-in-law joined him on the bridge.

'What is it?' Younger Brother asked him.

Li shook his head. Not a police launch, not outside the southern boundary. Chinese navy perhaps. Those turds of lepers were nothing more than pirates.

'Shall we lose the white powder?' Younger Brother asked him.

Li hesitated. The number four had been packed in water-tight drums, encased in plaster of Paris. After a few days the plaster of paris would dissolve, the drums would refloat. With this new gwailo invention, the GPS, they could return in a few days to recover their cargo. Perhaps.

Or perhaps it would be lost to the sea.

'Wait,' Li said. After all, judging by the sound of the motor, they must be at least a mile away.

Still time.

In the darkness they were aware of the looming silhouette of the trawler even before they saw it. A miasma of dried fish hung around it like a fog.

The lighter's aluminium skin had been painted black, and they remained invisible in the darkness. They skimmed across the surface of the waves, their spines jarred as they bounced on the swell, the tiny craft powered by five 275 horsepower Mercury outboards.

In the forward compartment of the lighter were four men, all dressed identically in black wetsuits and balaclavas. One sat behind the wheel, two others readied a heavy fifty-calibre Browning that had been mounted on the bow, the last aimed a searchlight at the looming shadow on the sea ahead of them.

'Now!' he shouted.

'What are we going to do?'

Li knew he had hesitated too long. This was no Chinese patrol boat, this was a smuggler's craft, a speedboat! May all gods great and small piss on his joss!

'Get the white powder!' he shouted at his brother. He recognised the panic in his own voice.

Suddenly they were blinded. The superstructure of the *Chung Yang* was bathed in white light and it was as if firecrackers had exploded over their heads. Li threw himself onto the deck. He heard his younger brother shrieking in terror.

Bullets clanged against the metal upperworks. He felt the warm flow of his own water down his left leg. Too late to save the white powder now. He heard the angry roar of the outboards almost under the port bow.

May all gods defecate on the head of the man who made outboard motors!

The Browning had done its work. Bouncing on the waves in the front of the lighter, the two black-clad figures at

the machine gun had not hoped for accuracy. The noise of the weapon, a few rounds smacking into the superstructure, would be enough to terrify the crew and create the right conditions for obedience when they boarded her.

The bank of outboards took them to the stern of the junk in less than thirty seconds. The pilot cut the engines, and manoeuvred her alongside. One of the men at the Browning reached for the three-point grapnel on the deck and threw it over the stern where it caught fast. He hooked a Chinese-made AK-47 over his shoulder and climbed up the rope, hand over hand.

The second gunman took a type 54 Black Star pistol from the zippered jacket of his wetsuit, cocked it, and followed him up the rope.

Now to do business.

The man with the assault rifle flicked on a waterproof halogen torch. He swung the beam around the deck, found the metal companionway that led to the poop and ran up. He found the old skipper still lying on the deck. When he saw him, Li raised his hands in the air, shouting for mercy in English and Cantonese.

Li's brother-in-law had crawled towards the gangway. His fingers were inches from the compartment where Li stored a clear plastic bag containing some ancient flares and a fire axe. The gunman screamed a warning, rushed over, and clubbed him twice with the butt of the AK-47.

'Tell your crew to start loading the white powder into our boat,' the man said to Li in Cantonese.

'We're just poor fishermen,' Li said, beginning the speech he had rehearsed many times. 'I don't know what you mean.'

His eyes strayed to his brother-in-law. He was lying on his back, a froth of bloody bubbles coming out of his nose. Barbarians!

The gunman switched the assault rifle to single fire and placed the muzzle against Li's right knee. 'Tell your crew to load the white powder now, or I will start shooting pieces

of you into the water. I'm going to start with your right kneecap.'

There were six drums in the hold, covered with a tarpaulin. The plaster of Paris casing was split open with an axe, the lids prised open with crowbars. The contents, hundreds of sealed packets of Double U-O globe number four, still wrapped in waterproof polythene, were thrown down to the lighter. The two gunmen found another drum; inside, instead of neat packets of heroin, were a number of white morphine bricks, wrapped in heavy plastic. These too were transferred to the lighter.

The operation took less than thirty minutes.

When the loading was finished Li and his crew were herded into the wheelhouse. The torch flicked off. There was a single gunshot, deafening in the cramped confines of the trawler's bridge, and an explosion of glass. They had shot out the pressure lamp.

Li expected to die.

'Tell Eddie Lau The Ox says thank you!' one of the gunmen shouted.

A few moments later Li heard the roar of a massive bank of outboards churning to life. He ran to the port side, saw the lighter's silhouette bounce away through the chop.

He had just lost two hundred kilos of refined heroin. What was he going to tell the Company?

2

Hong Kong

It was a warm afternoon in April. At this time of year in Hong Kong the warm southern monsoon meets the cooler winter monsoon and the air becomes thick and damp, settling over the peninsula like a suffocating blanket and shrouding Victoria Peak in thick cloud.

Madeleine Lacey was trapped in traffic heading west on Lockhart Road towards Wanchai police station and her cramped office on the second floor. Ahead of her the towering edifice of the Bank of China disappeared into the mist, obscuring the two 'chopsticks' on its roof. A bad luck sign, the local Chinese said. Like incense in an urn. The Taoist death sign. Even more sinister since Tiananmen.

Beside her in the front seat Detective Sergeant Brian Kwok cleaned his teeth with a toothpick, in the distinctive manner of a Chinese, holding the sliver of wood with his left hand and covering his mouth with his right.

They had just come from the Causeway Bay apartment of a waiter who had been attacked while leaving the restaurant where he worked in Jardine's Crescent. A week before he had been slashed with choppers, in the middle of the day, in front of scores of witnesses. The Organised Crimes and Triad Bureau had not even been alerted until an hour later when they received a call from the casualty department of the Adventist Hospital on Stubbs Road.

The man had suffered terrible injuries; his attackers had severed almost every muscle in his back. But he refused to identify his assailants, or even offer a description, and now he had discharged himself from hospital.

When they had visited his tiny flat he was lying on his

bed, still barely able to move. His wife had let them into the apartment. Lacey guessed the man would never recover full use of his arms, was destined to spend the rest of his life as a partial cripple, testimony to the power of the triad who had targeted him.

But still he would not talk.

Either he was too frightened, or he was a triad member himself, and their codes of discipline insisted on silence, till death. If that was the case, and the man was an initiated member of another triad, then there would certainly be retribution. But it would not come in any court of law.

It might have depressed her, but Lacey had lived all her life in Hong Kong and now she had come to accept the frustrations of her job.

The phone under the dashboard trilled to life. Brian Kwok snatched it off its cradle and passed it to her. It was their boss, Tyler.

'Lace? Are you still out at Causeway Bay?'

'At the lights on Percival Street.'

'We've just got a despatch call for a chopping on Hennessey Road. Wanchai Mah-jongg Club. Know it?'

'I'll get straight over.'

'Peter Ong's on his way with David Poon right now.' He hung up.

Lacey flicked on her headlights and as the lights changed she jammed her fist on the horn and turned left onto Percival. She weaved through the snarl of taxis and trucks, knowing it was practically useless. Everyone in Hong Kong drove as if they were on their way to an emergency.

The parked ambulance had blocked one lane of Hennessey Road and nothing was moving. Lacey and Brian Kwok left the car four hundred metres away, still sandwiched between a taxi and a delivery truck, and ran the rest of the way. When they reached the scene two Chinese constables in orange and yellow flash jackets were trying to keep back the onlookers. A lot of them, Lacey noted sourly, were tourists with cameras.

Lacey held up her identity badge and she and Kwok pushed their way through.

The ambulance crew were at work on the stricken form in the back of the ambulance. They had stripped off the man's shirt and put pressure dressings on the worst of the wounds. There was also a compression bandage high on the left arm, the time of its application, '13.32', written on the man's forehead in black grease pencil. The man's head and torso were slick with blood, and more of it was smeared over the floors and sides of the ambulance. Six litres in the average human body, one of the veteran CID detectives had told Lacey once. If it was paint you could put two coats on your apartment walls and still have some left over for the front door.

Her man was shivering on the gurney, as if he was freezing. Not a good sign. Bad shock.

Lacey held out her ID. 'How is he doing?' she said, through the back door.

'Haemorrhagic shock. Serious lacerations to the head, shoulders and arms, brachial artery on the left arm probably severed. He's running on empty.'

Lacey looked around. One of the uniformed policemen was trying to protect the scene outside the club, his partner was busy behind her, pushing back the spectators. He was young, and wore thick black-rimmed spectacles.

'Any witnesses?' she asked him, in Cantonese.

'No one saw anything. These people all say they heard the sirens and just came over to take a look. They are all very shocked and want to know what we are going to do about it.'

'Were you first here?'

'Yes, Inspector.'

'Did he say anything?'

The policeman shook his head.

'Is that where you found him?'

A puddle of blood on the pavement marked the spot where her man had bled away two or three pints of his life.

'Any ID on him?'

The young policeman handed her the man's identity card. Li Kam-chuen. G160616. Seventy-three years old.

'I also found this in his pocket.'

It was a small slip of paper with Chinese characters

written in black ink. Lacey handed it to Brian Kwok for a translation.

'It's a *chim* reading from a geomancer at one of the temples.'

'What does it say?'

'*You will have double good luck and live to see grey hairs in your beard.*'

Lacey heard the wall of more police patrols converging on the club. They would have to protect the scene. To her dismay she could see a footprint in one of the blood pools. Assailant or spectator?

She turned to Brian Kwok. 'Go with him.' she said. 'Record everything he says. Bag his clothes.'

Kwok jumped in the back of the ambulance, and it pulled away, sirens wailing. Lacey looked towards the footpath. So much easier when the victims were assailed indoors. She guessed there would not be much worth saving here.

She looked up at the grey, clinging sky. It had started to rain.

3

That Saturday afternoon there was no shortage of bleeding bodies at the casualty department of the Hong Kong Adventist Hospital. There had been another motor vehicle accident in the Aberdeen Tunnel and a man had been stabbed in an argument in the kitchen of a dim sum restaurant in Happy Valley.

When Lacey reached the hospital she found a doctor and two nurses in a curtained-off cubicle working quickly and efficiently around the supine body of her victim. His body was streaked with dried blood; black gobs of it had congealed in his hair. The numbers the ambulance crew had written on his forehead were stark against the man's deathly white skin. An intravenous tube fed saline fluids into his body, a digital pulse oxymeter blinked out the man's pulse rate, oxygen perfusion and systolic and diastolic blood pressure readings; pads on the man's chest were linked to an ECG. They had already intubated, and a nurse stood by Li's head ventilating with a soft Laerdal bag.

Brian Kwok was standing to one side holding the remnants of the T-shirt and vest that the emergency crew had cut off their victim in the back of the ambulance. They were now sealed in a clear plastic bag.

Lacey selfishly willed the man to live. The thunderstorm that arrived five minutes after the ambulance had left the scene had eradicated any hope of finding physical evidence, and they had no witnesses. If her man died, they had little chance of turning this statistic around.

Brian Kwok nodded at her and handed her his notebook. He had drawn a quick sketch of the man's wounds, front and back. More than two dozen lacerations.

The doctor was trying to clamp arterial forceps over the

gaping wound in the man's upper arm. Simon Chan. She knew him from previous, similar scenes. He looked up at her.

'Is he going to make it?' Lacey whispered.

Simon Chan frowned and shook his head. 'If he was running at Happy Valley, I wouldn't put my money on him,' he said.

But five hours later the bet was still good.

Lacey had gone back to Wanchai police station to write up her report and when she got back to the hospital she was surprised to learn that Li Kam-chuen was still alive. Emergency surgery had taken almost two hours and Chan had put one hundred and twenty-three stitches in the wounds to Li's head, neck and back. The most serious injury was the severed brachial artery, which Chan had repaired, but he did not discount the possibility that Li would lose the arm. He had been transferred from the operating theatre to the hospital's ICU unit.

'He's still sedated,' Chan told her. 'I'll let you have two minutes.'

Li lay on his side, his back and head swathed in dressings, his left arm also heavily bandaged and suspended in a splint. Oxygen tubes and intravenous catheters led from his nose, his arm and his groin; other wires led to the battery of machines that monitored his vital signs.

Lacey leaned down and whispered, close to his ear, in Cantonese: 'Can you hear me, grandfather?'

'Mother?' the man said, his eyes flickering, eyes glassy with other visions.

Chan grinned at her and said, in English: 'Too many late nights, Miss Lacey. Not good for the complexion.'

She leaned closer, grimacing at the familiar trauma odours of anaesthetic and sweat. 'My name is Detective Inspector Madeleine Lacey of the Serious Crimes Squad. Can you tell me who did this to you?'

The man mumbled a name, but Lacey could not hear it.

'Who did this to you?' she repeated.

'Crazy Eddie,' the man said. 'Three men . . . but I . . . only know . . . Crazy Eddie.'

Lacey felt a cold tingling in her belly. 'why?'

'. . . drink . . .'

'What?'

'. . . mother . . . glass of water . . .'

Simon Chan shook his head.

'Why did Crazy Eddie do this to you?'

The man closed his eyes, and his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat.

'Why did Crazy Eddie do this to you, grandfather?'

'Pirates command the fragrant harbours at night.'

'What?'

'There are guns . . . in the darkness.'

Chan tapped her on the shoulder and shrugged. It was unlikely she would get much more.

'You know who he's talking about?' Chan whispered.

Lacey nodded. 'Crazy Eddie, as they say in official police parlance, is not unknown to us.'

'Ah.'

'Try and keep him alive,' she said.

Chan gave her a diffident smile. 'Oh, we do our best.'

It was, as Lacey liked to tell anyone who would listen, a nine to five job. Nine p.m. to five a.m.

It was almost eleven o'clock when she got back to Wanchai police headquarters on Gloucester Road. Tyler, who ran the squad, was still in his office, peering suspiciously at the words he had just punched out on his electric typewriter. He distrusted machines and hated paperwork.

There was a large take-away Pizza Hut pizza on the desk. Tyler's Chinese nickname roughly translated to Harbour Dredger, a reference to his eating habits.

'Back on health food again,' Lacey said, leaning on the door jamb.

Tyler's mouth was full. He waved her to a chair. Lacey threw her shoulder bag on the desk and sat down. Tyler watched her out of the corner of his eye. He swallowed hard. 'You got the chopping on Hennessey Road.'

'That's right.' Go ahead, ask me the question, Lacey thought.

'How did it go?'

'I just wrote out an arrest warrant,' she said, trying to sound as casual as she could.

Tyler threw another slice of pizza in his mouth and kept typing.

Bastard.

'Just one?' he said, taking elaborate care over the letter Q.

'Martin, I had no witnesses and no physical evidence. What do you want?'

'Blood,' he said.

'Well there was plenty of that.'

Tyler looked at his watch, and turned away from the typewriter rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. 'This warrant. Anyone I know?'

Lacey feigned ignorance, and referred to her notebook. 'Lau Hsu-shui. Ring any bells with you.'

'Crazy Eddie?'

Lau Hsu-shui – Eddie Lau or more commonly, Crazy Eddie – had achieved a certain notoriety in the colony in his twenty-nine years. On superficial examination he appeared to be a legitimate, if flamboyant, businessman; he owned five restaurants in Kowloon and Victoria and a penthouse apartment in the Mid-levels.

But inside the OCTB he had a dossier two inches thick. His name was repeatedly linked with gambling, extortion and narcotics rackets in Wanchai and Mongkok, and he was now believed to have attained the rank of 426 Red Pole in the Wo Sing Wo triad, one of Hong Kong's largest criminal fraternities. But until now there had never been any evidence against him that could be used in a court of law.

'What have you got, Lace?' Tyler asked her.

'The victim gave him up in the hospital.'

Tyler looked doubtful. 'Did he die?'

Lacey shook her head. 'He was still alive when I left.'

Tyler selected a piece of ham off the crust of his pizza and examined it carefully, as if inspecting a gemstone for flaws. 'Good luck.'

'I know what you're thinking,' she said.

Tyler swallowed the piece of ham and returned to the typewriter. He peered at the keyboard and looked for the letter U. 'Then I won't say it,' he said, spraying the typewritten sheets with a piece of ham.

Lacey went out.

'He'll recant!' Tyler shouted after her.

4

He was standing just inside her office, staring at a link analysis chart. He looked tired and rumpled, and his suit hung on him like a sack. And he was smoking. In her office. Right next to the red-lettered sign she had tacked onto the wall that said 'No Smoking'.

'Can you read?' she said.

He looked up, at her and through her. She had seen eyes like that before, in the faces of sixteen-year-old triads, hard and empty. 'Sure,' he said. 'Something you want me to help you with?' It was an American accent, the voice rich and lazy.

Lacey nodded towards the sign.

'So that's why there aren't ashtrays?' he said.

'Let me guess. The Marlboro Man?'

He flicked his cigarette into the waste basket. 'Name's Keelan. John Keelan. Fire Prevention Officer. You Lacey's secretary?'

'I am Detective Inspector Lacey.'

A flicker of a smile. 'I knew that,' he lied.

She threw her shoulder bag on the desk and stepped to one side. 'Get out.'

Dave McReadie walked through the door holding two polystyrene cups of dark coffee. He sensed the mood in the room immediately. 'I see you've met John,' he said.

McReadie was a chief superintendent with the Narcotics Bureau. His presence confirmed her guess about Keelan. 'DEA?' she said.

'A week out of San Francisco.'

Lacey threw herself into her chair. The room stank of stale tobacco smoke. Her pet hate. 'Buying up duty free Winstons or does he have business here?'

Keelan took the coffee from McReadie and sat down. 'I didn't mean to offend you, Detective Lacey. I didn't see the sign.'

'Don't offer to do any surveillance jobs for us.'

'I haven't made a good first impression, have I?' He smiled apologetically at McReadie, and then, for just a moment, his attention seemed to be dragged elsewhere. Lacey saw that same vacant stare in his eyes he had had when she walked in.

She turned to McReadie. 'How can I help you, Mac?'

'John is interested in your fisherman.'

'What fisherman?'

'The gentleman who was attacked in Hennessey Road yesterday afternoon.'

Lacey sat forward. 'What's your interest in him, Mister Keelan?'

'Our Bangkok office passed his name along to us two days ago. We have reliable information linking him to a narcotics ring shipping number four heroin into the US.'

Lacey studied him. If he paid a little more attention to shaving, and if he ironed his shirt in the morning, he might look a little more like a policeman and less like an encyclopaedia salesman down on his luck. She revised her first impressions of him; probably early thirties and not forties, it was just the crumpled look of him that made him seem older. And occasionally there was a spark of humour and intelligence in his eyes, when his attention wasn't diverted by some interior picture show.

'Can I ask about the source of your information and what precisely you wish to talk to Mister Li about?'

'Bangkok won't identify their CI. Standard practice. They gave us your Mister Li's name, said he was a contact man for Thai trawlers bringing in number four from Bangkok and transferring them to junks just outside Hong Kong waters. They also said the network was organised by a man named Crazy Eddie Lau.'

Lacey stared at him. 'Who?'

'Eddie Lau,' Keelan said. 'Do you know him?'

Lacey leaned forward on her desk. 'Do you have any more information on this man?'

Keelan shook his head. 'That's all we got.'

McReadie must have seen what was coming. 'Lace . . .' he began, but Lacey cut him off with a look.

'Can you write it down for me?' she said to Keelan.

Keelan appeared stunned. 'Write it down?'

'The name of this man you're looking for.'

'Eddie Lau?'

She nodded.

Keelan wrote 'Eddie Lau' on a piece of paper and handed it to her. She screwed it up and threw it in the waste bin without looking at it.

'Yeah, is there a point?' Keelan said.

'Do you know how many Chinese surnames there are in circulation?' Lacey said.

'I don't have a phone book with me right now, Inspector but . . .'

'The Chinese race is known as *lao pai hsing*, the Old Hundred Names. In fact there's more than a hundred surnames. There's four hundred and seventy-two. Out of a world population of approximately one billion Chinese. A quarter of the world's population with under five hundred surnames between them and you come in here and ask me to find someone called Eddie Lau.'

'I didn't ask if you knew him personally.'

Lacey let that one pass. 'You see, Mister Keelan, in anglicising a Chinese name you make it unintelligible. For example, someone with the surname Ng could spell it Eng or Ong or even Ing. And that's just part of the problem. Although the written language is the same, the spoken language varies from region to region. For example, our same Mister Ng can go to Peking and become Mister Wu.'

'I get the picture.'

'That's not the picture, that's just the frame. Every Chinese has five or six names; the milk name from babyhood, his proper name in childhood, his school name, his business name, his marriage name, his nickname. And if he's a criminal, he may also have a number of aliases as well. That is why it is law in Hong Kong that every resident over the age of

sixteen has to carry an identity card bearing their photograph and triple-C number.'

'Triple C?'

'Chinese Commercial Code. Because of the ideographic nature of written Chinese, each character forms an image rather than a sound as in the western alphabet. The triple C number can be established by writing a name in Chinese characters and is almost as unique to a Chinese as a fingerprint. That is why, if you want us to look for someone for you, we need you to have the name of that person written in Chinese. Otherwise, if you insist, I shall round up every Eddie Lau in Hong Kong and transport them to the United States for you, at your own cost, on a 747.'

There was a long silence. 'You don't like smokers do you?' Keelan said.

McReadie leaned forward now. 'Lace, tell him about Eddie Lau.'

'How can I be sure we are speaking about the same person?'

McReadie shrugged. 'I think the odds are in our favour.'

'You do know an Eddie Lau?' Keelan said.

'To echo a point you made earlier, Mister Keelan – not personally.'

'Well can you tell us what you do know?'

'His real name is Lau Hsu-shui. He is known on the streets as Crazy Eddie. We have an extensive dossier on him, but the last conviction was in 1984, when he received a suspended three-month sentence for aggravated assault. He is a powerful and well-connected gangster associated with the Wo Sing Wo. We also, it might interest you to learn, have a warrant for his arrest. Your Mister Li has named him as one of the men who chopped him.'

'Chopped?' Keelan said.

'Assaulted him with a meat cleaver. It's a favourite form of personal expression among the triads.'

'So you believe this attempted murder is drug related.'

'Your presence here this morning begs the question, doesn't it? But motive is something I reserve for television

detective shows. I have a statement from the victim, I'm not much concerned why it happened.'

'What have you got on Mister Li?' McReadie asked.

'He has no police record. For the last twenty years the gentleman has made his living as a trawler captain sailing his own vessel, the *Chung Yang*, out of Aberdeen. Five years ago he started buying property. He currently owns an apartment overlooking Deep Water Bay and three rented flats in west Aberdeen.'

'Must have caught a lot of fish.'

'Quite. His luck must have taken a turn for the worst recently. After the attack on Mister Li we naturally attempted to interview some of his family members. It seems his brother-in-law was admitted to Queen Mary hospital in Pokfulam last week with serious facial injuries. He told the triage nurse he had fallen down a companionway on the *Chung Yang* in a storm.' Lacey raised an eyebrow to express her opinion on that. 'He discharged himself from the hospital the next day and has since disappeared. There are grave fears for his safety, as the saying goes.'

'What was this Li doing outside the Wanchai Mah-jongg Club?' Keelan said.

Lacey gave him a searching look. 'He had been playing mah-jongg, I suppose. It's not an unusual habit, in Hong Kong.'

'We'd like to talk to Mister Li as soon as we can,' McReadie said.

'That shouldn't be too difficult to arrange. He won't be going anywhere for a while.'

'We've applied for a search warrant for the fishing junk, as well as all of Mister Li's properties,' McReadie added.

'You won't find anything.'

'I know, Lace. But we'd better look anyway.'

'And what about this guy, Eddie Lau?' Keelan asked.

'We're still looking for him. He may have decided to stay away from the wind, as the Chinese say.'

'I'm sure you'll blow him out,' Keelan said, and he and McReadie stood up. Keelan held out his hand. 'It was a great pleasure to meet you, Inspector Lacey. I'll remember what you said about the Commercial Codes.'

'I doubt it,' Lacey said.

Keelan gave her a twisted smile and left.

McReadie followed him out, then stopped at the door. 'He's okay,' he said to Lacey. 'Don't take it personally.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Does he know the Marlboro Man's dying of lung cancer?'

'I don't think he gives a damn. Let us know when you find Eddie.'

'I will. Thanks for the visit.'

'Got a plum shoved up her ass,' Keelan said in the elevator.

'You don't find a whole lot of women in Serious Crimes,' McReadie said to him. 'She can be a little raw sometimes. What do you expect?'

'She deliberately set out to break my balls.' Keelan shoved his hands in his pockets. 'High-handed, snotty-nosed little bitch.'

'Yeah,' McReadie said. 'She's also my niece.'

Keelan stared at him. No, he wasn't joking. He leaned back and stared at the ceiling lights. 'Sorry,' he said.

'It's okay,' McReadie told him. 'I hear it all the time.'

5

It was a red convertible BMW 525i with licence plates RW 163. They had cost her one hundred and twenty-five thousand Hong Kong dollars at auction, because in Chinese numerology they were considered lucky. The number six signified life, and the number three perpetuity; so 163 meant 'live all the way'. It was something Ruby Wen Shui-ming had always tried to do.

Kwun Tong was a sulphurous corridor of concrete, just four hundred metres from the runway at Kai Tak, two hundred thousand people crammed into a square kilometre of flyovers and filthy, shambling high rises.

Ruby parked the car in the road outside a cluster of Mark II twelve-storey apartment blocks, built during the boom of the late sixties, the concrete now blotched with brown cancers and the spill of ancient air conditioners. High above her laundry fluttered on poles, the tawdry bunting of Hong Kong, a few limp ferns protruded from the high windows on crowded metal racks.

Ruby Wen stretched one long black-stockinged leg out of the car, the short nappa leather skirt riding high up her thigh. She hitched a Cardin bag over the shoulder of her black leather jacket and popped a wad of spearmint gum in her mouth. Her black high-heeled pumps clipped on the concrete.

She was feeling lucky. That morning she had consulted the T'ung Shu, juggling the numbers of her birthdate with the present configuration of the twenty-eight constellations to find the most propitious hour of the day for this visit. The book had told her that between eleven and three the stars were in a favourable alignment for making male heirs and beginning new business ventures.

As she got in the elevator she wrinkled her nose at the

smell of stale urine. But the apartment was on the top floor, so there was no choice. Even if I took the stairs, she thought, I could skid my heel on the shit and break my head.

The apartments had been built without kitchens, so the tenants had to cook their food in the corridors and as she got out of the elevator she was assailed by the taint of boiled cabbage and ginger. She reached into her handbag and dabbed some tiger balm under her nose.

She found the apartment and knocked five times, three long, two short. The door opened a fraction. The face that peered out at her was hidden behind a pair of industrial goggles, the straight black hair drenched with sweat.

She slipped inside.

The heat inside the apartment was appalling. Shades had been pulled across all the windows, the tiny room was lit by a naked one-hundred-watt globe. An electric fan whirred in the corner but it barely stirred the hot, mildewed air. Today there was no breeze, even up here, to cool the apartment or carry away the stinking vinegar smell of hydrochloric acid.

Ruby wheeled around and kicked the door shut. 'You fucking crazy?' She had to shout over the hissing of the gas burners in the living room.

Martin Fong pulled off the mask, his face flushed and gleaming. He was naked under his overalls, which were dripping with his own sweat.

'Nearly fifty kilos of morphine on that boat!' he shouted back at her. 'We make it into number four we got another two million dollars, Ruby! Each!'

'Already got eight million, never mind! You fucking crazy? This stuff blows up, what do we have, heya?'

'I know what I'm doing,' Martin said.

'Stinks in here! Everybody in Kwun Tong knows that smell, know you are making number four up here!'

'You want us to just leave it here? When I can make us another two million Hong Kong?'

Ruby stared at him.

'No one follows you?'

'Men follow Ruby Wen all the time,' she said, and saw how his cheeks flushed with rage.

'Don't joke,' he said.

'Bad luck to be so serious. Give me the little four. Can't stand it in here, it's too hot. Makes my pussy itch.'

He went into the bedroom to get the Samsonite case with the heroin. While he was gone Ruby checked the rest of the tiny apartment. Three others, dressed in the same sweat-stained overalls as Martin, sat on their haunches, their eyes fixed on thermometers that were suspended in coppers of boiling water. Pyrex flasks simmered in the water, coiled glass tubes extending from the necks of the flasks. Other flasks, containing soda, ammonia and hydrochloric acid were scattered around the bare cement floor.

Ruby understood only a little about the process. She knew it was dangerous. The water had to be kept at a constant temperature of one hundred and eighty-five degrees. If it went below, the morphine would spoil; if it went above the mixture could explode, and the volatile gas could vaporise the apartment and everyone in it.

Crazy risk. *Crazy*!

Martin touched her shoulder. She turned around. He was holding a blue Samsonite case. He snapped open the locks and showed her the contents; fifteen units of Khun Sa's Double U-O Globe number four heroin, ten and a half kilos, worth one and a half million Hong Kong dollars wholesale here in Hong Kong, more, much more on the streets of New York or Manchester or Hamburg.

'Five days we got another seventy units.'

Ruby took the case from him. Ruby had always thought she was the greedy one. Life was full of surprises, heya! 'Fucking crazy,' she repeated, and tried to push past him to the door.

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her into the bedroom, away from the jealous eyes of the other three men. He pulled her hand down to his groin. She pulled it away just as quickly, as if he'd put it in scalding water. 'Too hot in here for dirty stuff.'

His face was sulky. 'Ruby.'

'Heya, you feel like boiled cabbage.'

'You don't butterfly on me?'

'I don't make sweet eyes with anyone but you,' she simpered. 'Only love you, baby, love you too much. Now I got to sell this white powder, okay?'

He grabbed her jacket. 'Don't you cheat me, Ruby.'

The pretty heart-shaped mouth left a smear of lip gloss on his mouth. 'Trust me,' she said, and hurried out the door.

Ruby laid the suitcase on the kitchen table and stared at it. Her mouth was dry and her chest felt tight. There was the same mixture of excitement and fear she always experienced just before she approached a gambling table or took a new lover to bed. So much to win, so much to lose. The cold tingling sensation in the pit of her belly increased until it was almost unbearable. If Eddie came through that door now he would know, and she would be dead. Maybe. Or maybe even if he knew he would not do anything. Eddie always forgave his Ruby for anything. He always did.

Fifteen units. Each glassene bag contained seven hundred grams of 98 per cent pure white heroin. No good to cut to thirty per cent and sell it here in Hong Kong, it would drive down the price and Eddie would know. Besides, if you really wanted to get rich, you had to sell in Europe or America. For the foreign devils, the *gwailos*.

So the question was how much to cut. The more she cut, the more profit she would make. But the risk was terrible. This was an unforgiving business.

She decided to cut the purity to eighty-five per cent. Then ten and a half kilos became twelve kilos, and the extra one and a half kilos was pure profit.

She went to the window. Two helicopters angled across the harbour, returning to the sombre shadow of a US aircraft carrier anchored in Wanchai dock. She closed the blinds on the grey and forbidding city.

The afternoon was clammy and thick but she had to eliminate draughts. She turned off the air conditioner and stripped down to her briefs.

She went into the bedroom and took down a box from the top of a shelf. Inside was a cheap workman's face mask, a piece of oil cloth, a set of kitchen scales, a flour sifter, some

bags of milk sugar and a small bottle of quinine powder. The milk sugar resembled heroin, while the quinine would replace the bitter taste that would be lost in the dilution. At the bottom of the box were a number of forged Double U-O globe packets. She counted out twelve and went back into the kitchen.

Ruby made sure all the windows were closed, then fitted the mask. No matter how careful she was, she knew she could not avoid leaving a fine dusting of heroin in the air, and if she inhaled too much pure white powder she could suffer a fatal high.

She spread the oil cloth on the kitchen table, cut open the glassene bags and carefully weighed three hundred and fifty grams of the heroin on the scales, and then transferred it to the sifter. To this she added five grams of quinine and fifty grams of the milk sugar.

Then she meshed the wire screens of the sifter so that the powders mixed together evenly. It was a long and laborious process and when it was complete she had to sift the mixture again to fluff it out. When it was done she stacked it in the centre of the oilcloth with a spatula.

Finally she used a piece of cardboard to scoop the heroin into the glassene packets, each containing seven hundred grams of the adulterated heroin, and sealed the bags.

She tore off the mask, and threw the oilcloth and the implements into a green garbage bag. Then she lit a cigarette. Four hundred and twenty Hong Kong dollars for the quinine. Ninety-five Hong Kong dollars for the milk sugar. Nothing for the heroin. After costs her one-fifth share would be around two hundred thousand United States dollars plus another one hundred and fifty thousand clear profit for what she had cut.

She made another quick mental calculation. She owed Peter Mui five hundred thousand Hong Kong dollars for her gambling debts, just over sixty thousand American. She would pay him his money from her small change. Toss it out of her purse like throwing coins to a beggar.

But this was just the first instalment. There was another one hundred and ninety kilos still hidden in the apartment in

Kwun Tong. After overheads, a one-fifth share was still a fortune in the United States.

With joss.

She did not forget that one of the boys Martin had recruited to help him was formerly in the People's Liberation Army and the other two Chinese illegals, recruited for their desperation and not their brains. And Martin himself was still only a pimply little boy who liked to play with chemicals. He had hardly any experience. She only hoped he would not ruin everything with his stupidity.

She replaced the packets in the Samsonite case, snapped the locks shut and placed it on the top shelf of her robe in the bedroom. Then she went back to the kitchen, and rang a paging service on her cellular phone.

6

Every Chinese has at least one nickname and Henry Pi Hso-chang – Three Fingers – had earned his in a gang fight in Singapore when he was seventeen and had thrown up his left hand to stop a blow from a meat cleaver. It had saved his life, but almost cost him his left hand. Fifteen years later the hand was still mostly decoration, as he was fond of telling people, and not a very pretty one, Ruby decided. It had frozen into a claw, laced with the scars of old stitching, and the little finger was missing.

He was taking breakfast in the lobby of the Peninsula in Tsim Sha Tsui. He lounged in a high-backed Victorian chair, an incongruity among the bas relief and columns and potted plants, a jar of fine white bone china held in the claw of his left hand. With the other he spooned maple syrup over his French toast.

Henry Pi was a round and cherub-faced Malay Chinese. Scallops of flesh hung from his cheeks like saddlebags. He was grossly overweight and his face was slick with a sheen of sweat, even in the cool interior of the lobby. His other nickname was Won Ton; after the slick, sticky dough the Chinese favoured for breakfast.

His physical presence contrasted with the elegance of his clothes; a pearl grey cashmere sweater, black trousers and Gucci loafers. Gold rings adorned the remaining fingers of his crippled hand like nuggets, and his Rolex had diamonds set in the face.

Like a pig with jewellery, heya.

He stood up to greet her, his eyes shining with appetite, as if she were an especially sumptuous platter of sweets. He licked his lips. 'Ruby-ah,' he said. 'Good to see you again.'

Ruby shook his hand – like handling a dead fish, she thought

– and sat down. A waiter hovered around her, with napkins and silverware.

Henry poured some coffee from a silver pot into her cup. Coffee was a western habit; he was flaunting his sophistication. Ruby watched him with a mixture of fear and disgust. In his hand the cup looked as clumsy as a gorilla holding a child's toy.

They had met only once before, in Henry Pi's native Kuala Lumpur. A connection of a connection. He was in the transportation business. For thirty to forty per cent of your profits Henry Pi would have his mules transport product anywhere in the world.

Judging by the fat around his belly and the Gucci loafers, he was doing well at it.

'You would like some breakfast, Ruby?' he said, in quaint, English-accented English.

'Don't eat breakfast.'

'Quite right. A wonderful figure like yours. You look quite exquisite this morning, if I may say so.'

Ruby was wearing a simple black Calvin Klein, its hemline an inch above her knee. She saw him staring and carefully crossed her right leg over her left so that her skirt rode a little higher up her thigh. He was physically repulsive but it pleased her to watch the sweat erupt like little dewdrops on his upper lip.

'I had hoped we would meet again,' he said. 'It was most pleasant to hear from you again.'

'Maybe got a little business for you,' Ruby said.

'I feared it was merely business.' He smiled at her, his lips wet. 'What do you need, Ruby-ah?' he said, switching to Cantonese. 'You want to get powder to Europe or America?' he asked her, in the manner of a man starting a really good joke. He held up three fingers. 'Three days, okay? It's there.'

Ruby felt the tension through her whole body. But there was no going back now. 'Twelve kilos,' she said. 'To Golden Mountain.'

Henry Pi was smiling at her, playing the jolly fat man, Ruby decided. But his eyes were like pieces of flint. 'Where did you get this much little four?'

'Not your business. How much?'

'Seven hundred.'

'American or Hong Kong?'

He laughed at her little joke.

'Five,' she said.

'For such a wonderful service, and for so much risk? No, Ruby-ah. Six-fifty.' He lit a Dunhill, the cigarette held between the second and third fingers of his crippled left hand.

Ruby pointedly looked at her watch. He was playing games with her. 'Have to go. Nice talking to you.'

She stood up. Henry Pi laughed, his jowls wobbling like dewlaps. He waved her back to her seat. He stuffed his mouth full of French toast, which he swilled down with a mouthful of coffee.

Ruby waited. After a while he settled back in his chair, and returned his attention to his cigarette. His table manners disgusted her and unsettled her concentration. 'You behave bloody big, Ruby. But I like you. Maybe I can do for six hundred. Three hundred now, three hundred on delivery.'

'Perhaps I can do five-fifty,' Ruby said. 'I will have to ask the higher authority. But there is one problem.'

The string quartet on the balcony had begun a Bach fugue. Henry Pi moved his head from side to side in time with the music, his finger tapping the table, without rhythm. 'Problem, Ruby-ah?'

'Pay on delivery.'

Henry Pi pursed his lips into a thin smile. 'Must have half now, Ruby-ah. I have a lot of expenses in my business. I have to pay wages to people.'

'Okay, I pay you six hundred, when you deliver, and you got syrup on your chin.'

Three Finger wiped it away with his hand. Unexpectedly, he laughed. 'You are some piece of business,' he said.

'We have a bargain, Pi Hso-chang?'

Henry Pi considered. 'Three hundred thousand dollars is not a lot of money, Ruby-ah. Why is it your higher authority will not pay my expenses? Perhaps there is no higher authority?'

Ruby felt as if she was naked. She resisted the impulse

to run out of the doors. 'Six hundred when you deliver,' she repeated.

Henry Pi shrugged, and reached into his breast pocket. He took out a red one-hundred-dollar note from his crocodile skin wallet and tore it in half. He handed her one half of the note. 'Perhaps tonight we can mix business with pleasure,' he said, switching back to English.

I would rather drink my own vomit through a plastic straw, Ruby thought. 'Busy tonight,' she said. She put the torn note in her purse, got up, and walked away.

Ruby Wen emerged from the cross-harbour tunnel with the top down, her long black hair rushing behind her like a banner. The energy of Central drummed like a pulse, the clamour of grid-locked traffic, the thump of jackhammers. With the sand filtering away towards 1997 the city had become ever more frenetic, the ant-like fever of the cranes and bulldozers, everywhere there was bamboo scaffolding spidering up the raw cement flanks of yet another high rise.

She turned up Cotton Tree Drive, weaved through the city canyons to the Mid-levels. The Elliot Tower on Conduit Road rose like a pencil of pure graphite, its smoked glass reflecting the anarchy of high rise sprouting from the hill below. Ruby parked her BMW in the undercroft, between a red Saab and a black Mercedes 480 SEL, and rode the elevator to her apartment.

She fumbled in her crocodile-skin bag for her keys, light-headed with adrenalin. So easy to cheat the triads, even for a girl from a duck farm!

She threw open the door.

Someone grabbed her wrist and pulled her inside. The door slammed shut and a hand went around her mouth. 'I've been waiting for you,' a man's voice said.

An arm encircled her body, holding her arms tight to her sides. She kicked out. The man hissed with pain but his grip did not relax. He pushed her ahead of him to the bedroom.

Ruby writhed and struggled. The hand around her jaw was suffocating her.

'Didn't know I'd be waiting, did you?' the voice whispered.

He pushed her face down onto the bed, his weight pinning her. She tried to roll free, but now there was an elbow on her neck and she could not move.

'Thought this was a security apartment,' the man whispered. He was laughing.

Her dress had risen up to her hips. She felt him reach down and pull away her underwear. She screamed and kicked her legs. But he was too strong for her. He forced himself inside her, with ridiculous ease. She couldn't help it, she was wet.

There was a mirror at the end of the bed, framed with lacquer panels, dragons writhing in sinuous lines. She saw herself pinned underneath him, like a butterfly. He had forced her wrists above her head, held them there with his own hands, bunched into fists now, so tight she felt the blood squeezed from her fingers. He was poised over her, like some predator devouring prey, her own small and pretty features screwed into a grimace of pleasure and pain.

And then he thrashed, whimpering like a wounded animal. He pushed all the way inside her, uttering tiny gasps. She felt it too, a rose explosion that shook her unexpectedly with him. When the shuddering moment had passed he rolled away from her and lay on his back, his chest heaving, his mouth open to gulp in deep lungfuls of air.

Ruby rolled towards him and her lips fluttered over his eyes, his mouth.

'Eddie-ah,' she whispered. 'Why you never been to see me for so long?'

7

Ruby sat up. Her new pink silk briefs were torn. 'Look at this,' she complained. 'Pure silk. From Paris. Five hundred dollars.'

'Buy you another pair, okay? Buy you ten.'

He stripped off his clothes and went into the bathroom. Ruby heard the shower run. She rolled on her back and saw the Samsonite case on a shelf in the robe. Ten kilos of Eddie's heroin in there, heya.

She cleaned herself with the ruined briefs and walked out of the bedroom. The apartment was polished chrome and leather, crisp and functional, the exquisite Thai prints on the walls bought for her by an interior decorator. The smoked glass window offered glimpses of the harbour in between the commercial towers of Victoria. She spent little time in the apartment so there was little of her personality invested in it; the only intimate touches the goldfish lazily circling its aquarium – it was supposed to bring good luck – and the pictures on the walls, all at slant so that the ghosts who brought bad joss could not rest there, and would slide off.

Ruby poured Rémy Martin into a glass with soda and ice and returned to the bedroom. Eddie emerged from the bathroom, his jet black hair plastered straight back from his forehead. His naked body was covered with triad tattoos; a serpent slid down his right arm, a dragon decorated his back in vermilion and blue, an eagle writhed down his left arm. There was scarcely an inch of skin that had been left bare, just his hands and his face; those parts that were on view to the public. His body proclaimed his secret life.

He lay face down on the bed and Ruby knelt beside him. Unspoken, she began to massage his shoulders. Up close she could see where the tattoos were distorted by the angry red

flesh of the scars of his profession. In this position also, she could see the most bizarre of the designs; his right buttock was tattooed with the tail of a rat, its body disappearing into his most intimate orifice.

'They are looking for me,' he said. 'Li has talked. He broke his triad oath.' His voice was soft and sibilant, like something rustling in the undergrowth of a forest.

Ruby felt the tenseness in his neck muscles. Like steel wire.

'Steals my number four and now he talks to the police, the *king chat*! I'll dig up his grandmother's grave and piss on her bones!'

'You must get out of Hong Kong, Eddie-ah. Maybe go to Taiwan.' That would suit me perfectly, she thought.

'Eddie Lau is not going to run away from a few policemen.'

She read the sulky tone in his voice. 'You know who steals our powder?'

'The wind whispers it is Pak Yok-kong.'

'The Ox? You are sure?'

'The Onion tied Li's leper of a brother-in-law to a chair and put a blowtorch to his secret sack. If the piece of dung knew anything, they would have heard him in China. He swore to the moment he went to the west that four pirates stole the powder and that they spoke The Ox's name as they departed the boat.'

'You believe this?' Ruby said, her own voice tight.

'If it is The Ox I shall cut off his stalk and make him eat it.'

Ruby worked the muscles that rippled the dragon's neck. While he thinks the thief possesses a jade stalk, I shall reside in bliss.

'How can we be sure of this?'

'I have a ghost inside the Sun Yee On, little flower. I will discover the truth.'

Ruby bent to kiss the nape of his neck. 'Love you too much,' she murmured in English.

'Must stay here tonight, Ruby-ah. The police are looking for me.'

'Wrap my arms and legs around you like a flower round a bee. You will be safe here tonight.' She ran her fingers lightly across his buttocks and between his legs.

'Ruby-ah,' he whispered, 'Sometimes think you are the only person in the world I can trust.'

8

Kennedy Town, in the Western District, lies in the shadow of Mount Davis, a fishing village now tight-packed with sixties apartment blocks, the air thick with the fug of bus fumes and the stench of the docks and the abattoirs. Mister Chau – or Golden Seven as he was known to his clients – lived in Davis Street, on the top floor of a decaying five-storey colonial building with peeling stucco walls.

Ruby climbed the creaky staircase to the top floor. Even in the middle of the day it was so dark she had to feel her way along the walls.

Mister Chau's apartment looked through a framework of bamboo scaffolding onto the grey walls of a newer, more modern apartment block, already stained with the leakage from air conditioners. From the open window the noise of car horns and the roar of the buses and trucks on Catchick Street was relentless.

Mister Chau's teeth were capped with gold, his moon face shiny and pink, as if he had already been embalmed in preparation for death. But it was his hands that were his most striking feature. They were beautiful hands, an artist's hands; the fingers were long and soft, the nails pink with perfect white half moons and a slender margin of white tip.

He led Ruby to a chair by the window, where yellow rays of sunlight were filtered by the slats of a cane blind. Fine layers of dust floated on the musty air. Mister Chau's cat watched them from the corner, its huge golden eyes blinking slowly.

He perched on his stool and took Ruby's face between his hands, tracing the contours of her nose, her lips, her jaw,

her forehead, like a blind man memorising the features of a stranger's face.

'Got lucky forehead,' he told her. 'But you cover with your hair. You cover with hair, your luck will go away. Must change hairstyle, okay?'

Then he took her hands in his own, holding them closer to the light, as if they were translucent and he was searching for the bones within. He paid special attention to her nails, her knuckles and then her palms.

'You make money very fast, you lose very fast. Think with your heart, not your head. This is not good thing, this is bad thing.'

'Is tomorrow lucky for me, grandfather?' she asked him.

'Tomorrow you will have good luck,' he said.

'Got lucky future also, grandfather?'

'You must stay in Hong Kong,' he said. 'You leave Hong Kong, you will have very bad luck. Nothing you can do. Just happen.'

'You see many grandchildren for me, grandfather?'

Mister Chau hesitated. He rubbed at the lines on her palm, as if ensuring they were genuine, not about to rub away.

'Yes, I see grandchildren,' he said. 'Many.'

Ruby smiled, satisfied.

Ruby Wen gave him her money and he heard her heels clatter on the ancient wooden stairs. There were no grandchildren in her future, of course, but then he could not tell his customers everything he saw. And for Ruby Wen, who was such a very good customer, he told only a little. He did not want to frighten her away.

Ruby made an appointment that afternoon at the Grand Hyatt's Il Colpo and had her hair re-styled. She told the hairdresser to cut off her shoulder length hair, especially the fringe. When she emerged an hour later, her black hair was cut short, swept back from her forehead with lashings of moussing gel. She saw her own reflection in a shop window and smiled when she saw her lucky forehead.

Aberdeen

It had been a fishing village once, now it was another conglomeration of housing estates, like North Point or Sai Wan Ho, a jungle of soaring buildings proliferating like shoots in a rainforest, competing with each other for the sky and the light. Brian Kwok's tiny flat was on the sixteenth floor of a high rise off Aberdeen Main Road, affording a glimpse of the chimneys of the power station on Ap Lei Chau between the concrete canyons.

He heard the din of the television even through the locked door. His wife and children were watching the Star Chinese Athlete Karaoke contest on Jade. As he opened the door his wife rushed to greet him. He followed her into the kitchen. As always there was a salty broth on the stove for him, and he drank the soup at the table in the tiny living room.

The flat was small, just two bedrooms to share between three adults and three children. But it had its own kitchen and bathroom, and compared to some, they were well off. There was even a tiny balcony, crammed with small metal racks of ferns and orchids that Grandmother tended every day.

He drank his soup in silence. He knew there was something wrong; knew straight away from the way his wife was too pleased to see him, chattering like a sparrow, covering her unease with talk. Brian Kwok had been a detective too long; he could discern the jarring anomalies in behaviour as a musician distinguishes a wrong note. And his wife, of course, he understood better than anyone.

'How was your day, husband?'

He studied the faces of his family, in the glow of the television set, his two youngest daughters, his mother-in-law, his elder son. Where was the problem?

'Is the soup really good?'

His son, Ah Soong, had his hand in front of his face, hiding something. There, that was it.

'Ah Soong,' he said.

The rest of the family looked at him, fearfully. They had been waiting.

'Come here.'

Ah Soong got up and came to stand by the table, his head bowed. He was ten years old, wiry, with prominent cheekbones, like his father.

'Look at me.'

Ah Soong raised his head. His right eye was pulpy and swollen, his nose and lip was cut, his mouth so swollen he looked as if he had lychees hidden under his upper lip. Brian felt a sudden blossoming of rage. He wanted to kill whoever had done this to his only son.

'What happened?' he said, his voice even, betraying none of the turmoil inside him.

Ah Soong looked at his mother, but she lowered her eyes. 'I was in the playground,' he mumbled, the swelling making it difficult for him to speak. 'There were three boys.'

'How old were these boys?'

'Older boys. I don't know. Thirteen, fourteen.'

'And what happened?'

Ah Soong studied the floor. 'They said they knew who I was. That my father was yellow air.'

Yellow air, triad slang for the police. 'And then?'

'They beat me up. They were laughing the whole time.'

'Why?' When Ah Soong did not answer he turned to his wife. 'Why?' he repeated.

'They told him you would know why,' his wife whispered. 'They said the Wo Sing Wo had sent them and you would know what to do.'

He leaped to his feet. Ah Soong flinched backwards. Brian went to the window and fumbled to light a cigarette. He stared at his reflection in the glass. Calm down, he told himself. It's just a few punks, talking big, I can deal with this. But he was afraid; down there, where his kids played, where his wife and his mother-in-law walked alone with their baskets of vegetables and fish, he could not protect them. This was triad ground, and if Crazy Eddie Lau wanted to hurt him, through his family, he could.

He stared at the lights from the flat in the next block. Cameos of the restless city; a young Chinese woman, ironing; a young boy bent over a computer; an old man

working at a bench with some sort of machine, perhaps sewing or soldering.

Easy for the *gwailos* to talk about containing the triads. But they lived in a separate world. It was here, in the estates, on the stairwells and in the playgrounds that Chinese like him were vulnerable. There was a message in his son's bruised and torn face. And it was meant for him.

Ruby stood on the corner of Hennessey Road and Jardine's Bazaar in Causeway Bay. Trams rattled past, painted with the colours of the city's commerce, the red and white of Marlboro, tartan for Caledonian, the blue and white of Olympus, a grinning dolphin for Ocean Park. She took her mobile phone from her shoulder bag, ignored the jostling of crowds scurrying to and from the markets and shops and the underground rail system, the MTR. She punched in a number and waited.

'No problem?' She had to shout over the din of the traffic.

'No problem.'

'Five minutes,' she said, and ended the call.

It was three minutes walk to the *yum cha*, a tiny restaurant squeezed between a cramped and narrow shop selling car batteries and a timber merchant. The hubbub of the street was punctuated with the scream of a bandsaw. The *yum cha* was tiny, just a dozen formica tables crammed into a narrow hole in the wall. The smell of boiling meat and steam. A man sat behind the cashier's till counting bank notes, a bill spike overflowing at his right elbow. Office workers ate around a *bain-marie* on the pavement.

As she walked in a young man in a dark suit and silk tie got to his feet. Their eyes met for a moment but she gave no indication that she knew him. As he rose, she took his place at the table. Ruby lit a cigarette and watched him cross the traffic to a 7–11 on the other side of the street.

The young man in the silk tie walked into the shop and along the aisle to the glass-doored refrigerator at the rear. A shorter man, with a wispy Fu Manchu moustache and a zippered rain jacket, was staring at the array of soft drinks.

'Are the drinks really cold?' he said, in Cantonese.

The other man did not reply. Instead he took out a torn one hundred dollar note and handed it to the younger man, who checked the serial number against his own portion of the banknote: PP 236314.

He reached into his pocket and handed the shorter man a set of car keys. He took them and walked out of the shop. The entire encounter had taken less than a minute.

The man with the Fu Manchu moustache walked into an alley opposite the Excelsior Hotel. There was a black Mazda parked there. He put a finger inside the exhaust pipe and flicked out a car key. He opened the boot, took out a Samsonite case, replaced the key in the exhaust and walked away.

The man with the silk tie joined Ruby at her table. Two secretaries from a bank in Hennessey Road occupied the other two stools, eating beef congee. The man in the silk tie did not speak. Ruby finished her dim sum lunch, and got up.

When she left both halves of the torn bank note were in her purse. It was her receipt for twelve kilograms of 85 per cent pure number four heroin, which would one day be worth seventy million dollars on the streets of New York.

9

Aberdeen

Lights flickered on across the harbour. Ruby Wen was helped aboard the walla-walla by the boat boy. He roped up the outboard, and started the motor with one sharp pull. Then he settled onto his haunches, the tiller controlled with his left hand. A blue curl of exhaust coughed into the wash.

The sun sank behind some torn white clouds, and the junk-heavy waters were cast in a romantic gloom.

The ancient and blackened hull of the junk appeared enormous from the walla-walla. Ruby stood up, unsteady, her floor-length Sonia Rykiel and the heavy briefcase she carried with her unsuited to scrambling in and out of boats. The boat boy helped her onto the creaking wooden pontoon, which was slick and black with seawater. She lifted the hem of her dress and climbed the steep companionway up to the deck of the junk.

A young boy in a frayed white jacket reached out to help her aboard. Other guests were still arriving below, mostly men, resplendent in black tuxedos. As night fell across Aberdeen the junk set sail for international waters to the south.

A canvas awning of lucky crimson and gold had been suspended over the deck from the poop to the bow. The deck boy opened a flap in the canvas to allow her to enter.

A balcony running the width of the poop overlooked the main deck, which was lit by a row of tasselled red lanterns. Wooden steps led down on either side.

There were six gaming tables, ranged on each side of the bulkhead, three a side. A sofa had been constructed around

the mast housing in the centre, and at the far end, near the bow, was a bar tended by white-jacketed waiters. Below her was a scatter of low tables, and long couches upholstered in red brocade.

The timbers creaked as the hull rolled with the swell. The throbbing of the diesel engine seemed to come from a long way away. The gaming had begun already. Those on board had come to gamble, and few of them were willing to wait until they were beyond the territorial limit.

As Ruby came down the companionway she saw Peter Mui. 'Respectfully hope you get lucky,' he said, smiling and bowing to her. It was his perennial welcome to all his customers.

Ruby returned the greetings but her eyes were on the table.

She looks like a beggar staring at a banquet, Peter Man thought. Her relationship to Eddie Lau made this difficult for him. She already owed him five hundred thousand Hong Kong dollars. He almost wished she would win tonight so that he would not have this problem. If she lost again he would have to sell the debt to the triad, and he would lose thirty per cent.

'Be careful, Ruby,' he said.

'Feel lucky tonight,' Ruby answered.

He did not smile.

In the briefcase she had a quarter of a million Hong Kong dollars, enough to play big, to win big. Ruby felt the familiar tingling excitement in the pit of her belly; better than fear, better than sex. It was only with this buzz of adrenalin in the veins, this rush of excitement and real fear that she felt truly alive.

The tables were set up for baccarat and blackjack. Ruby sat down at the blackjack table, opened the briefcase, shuffled a bundle of blue five hundred dollar notes across the baize to the croupier, received in return a pile of coloured chips. A silky, tongue-pink card was dealt face down in front of her. She slid a scarlet fingernail beneath the edge and curled it slightly so that she could see its value. A red queen. Another card slid face up across the baize. A ten, the ten of hearts.

A total of twenty. She pushed another ten thousand dollars worth of chips into the centre of the baize and touched her lucky forehead for luck.

The god of gamblers was perched on her shoulder. She felt the power in her tonight. She knew she was going to win.

Ruby could feel shoulders pressing around her, as other players crowded in to watch. She had won over four hundred and sixty thousand dollars, almost her entire debt to Peter Mui. She was dimly aware of him standing behind the croupier, staring at her.

She was in another world, a charmed dimension where rules and probabilities and luck did not exist; a place where she could tell the cards exactly what to do and they would obey her. If she imagined an ace, she would draw an ace; if she imagined a seven, it would magically appear from the shoe.

A voice inside her head was whispering to her to walk away and pay off her debts to Peter Mui. You have pushed your joss to its limits now, it said. Instead she nodded to the croupier. She would play again.

She caressed the back of the card, turned back the corner. The queen of hearts. She pushed a chip for ten thousand dollars onto the baize. She was hardly aware of the other players around her. They were mortals and losers. Her joss was one with the gods.

The croupier slid a second card towards her. An ace, Ruby told herself, amazed to find herself staring at a black seven. The bank had the jack of spades. A black jack. An omen perhaps.

She pushed another ten thousand away from her and waited.

The croupier pushed the DRAW tile towards her and she shook her head. The bank would bust, she was sure of it. She would win with the devil's seventeen.

The croupier completed shuffling extra cards from the shoe for the other players and then turned over her own two cards. The ace of clubs and jack of spades. A totally unnecessary blackjack. The players would have to pay double their bets.

Perhaps a sign her gods had departed.

Ruby was about to push away from the table, but her arms would not respond. She was down forty thousand dollars. She would play one more hand and win it back.

10

Fatigue had made her light-headed. She had been playing for almost six hours without a break. Her original stake was almost gone, she was down to her last twenty thousand. The spectators who had so admired her joss earlier in the evening had all drifted away. She felt like a singer performing to an empty theatre. She could hear people laughing and fancied the laughter was directed at her.

At one stage she had won nearly half a million Hong Kong. Now she had almost lost her entire stake. A loss of perhaps fifty thousand American. But she knew any moment the tide would turn in her favour again. She could still walk away a winner. She just had to keep her nerve.

She looked at her first card. The ace, the ace of hearts. She pushed the remains of her stake across the baize. This was it. A picture card, just over a four to one chance, and she would have a blackjack. The house would pay her back twice her stake. She would be on the road back.

She heard a waitress from somewhere asking her if she would like a drink. She shook her head, reached out a hand to push the woman away. Concentrate, concentrate on the cards.

The croupier slid another card towards her. Her heart was banging in her chest.

A picture card. By all gods great and small let it be a ten!

The six, the six of diamonds.

She felt sweat on her upper lip. She wiped it away with a quick, nervous movement of her finger.

A total of seventeen. She looked at the croupier's face-up card. A ten. The bank's chances of twenty were good.

The DRAW tile returned to her. She nodded. The three of clubs. She looked at the cards face up on the baize,

unbelievingly; this surely was an omen. 'Live all the way' was the meaning of 163. She *must* win.

She had a total of twenty – or ten. Twenty might not win. A five card trick was unbeatable. House rules.

She nodded for another card.

The two of clubs. Two – her lucky number and a total of twelve in her hand.

Now anything but a ten or a picture would give her a five card trick. She was going to win, the bank would pay her double.

In her mind she summoned an ace. The ace of diamonds.

A new card flicked from the shoe. A red queen.

Twenty two.

The croupier swept away Ruby's chips. It was over.

The atmosphere was sombre, heavy with cigarette smoke and the taint of salt and the sourness of rotting wood. When she turned away, the other players ignored her, their concentration focused on the next draw.

Ruby went to the bar and returned to the scatter of tables below the poop with a glass of Peter Mui's cheap cognac. She blinked, trying to focus on her watch in the darkness with eyes red-rimmed from strain. Almost three in the morning.

The tables were littered with bottles, the ashtrays overflowing. The stink of cigarettes suddenly offended her. It was in the upholstery, her clothes, in her skin.

She felt numb.

She remembered the four hundred and sixty thousand dollars of chips in front of her and she felt paralysed with remorse. It was gone, all gone.

The room swam in front of her vision. Somebody came to sit beside her. She looked around. It was Peter Mui.

'It was bad joss,' he said.

'Need another one hundred thousand,' she said.

He shook his head.

'Have the money, heya. Can pay you back. Just need one more day.'

Peter Mui got up and walked away.

Ruby stood up and headed towards the companionway. She staggered slightly, but she was unsure if it was fatigue or the movement of the junk against the swell. When she reached the deck she leaned over the side and vomited into the ocean.

The dark silhouette in the distance was China.

Does not matter, she told herself. In a week maybe, I will be rich. Will have three hundred and fifty thousand United States dollars. When you are rich can afford to lose a little bit now and then.

It's okay, Ruby-ah. Everything is going to be okay.

11

Kwun Tong housing estate

A firehose snaked across the landing, water dripped off the concrete and down the stairwell. Keelan followed McReadie and Daniel Yip, one of McReadie's sergeants from the Narcotics Bureau, down the hall. A fireman came past them grinning. He said something in Cantonese to Yip.

Yip laughed. McReadie just grunted.

'What did he say?' Keelan asked him.

'He said there's a barbecue on inside if we're hungry.'

Keelan was mystified by this comment until he followed the two detectives into the apartment. There the acrid smell of smoke and the sickly sweet taint of charred flesh was suffocating and Keelan felt his stomach churn in protest. He put a hand over his mouth and fought for control.

'Jesus Christ.'

Two detectives from the Kwun Tong OCTB had just finished picking through the wreckage. One of them saw McReadie, peeled off his latex gloves and shook hands. There was a short and whispered conversation.

An ambulance crew were unzipping a green body bag. One of the men stopped when he saw McReadie. McReadie reluctantly went over for a closer inspection. Keelan followed. There was little left that was recognisable as human, the head a charred black skull, laced with strands of raw pink tissue, the limbs frozen in the pugilistic attitude of the burned corpse. There was something shiny wrapped around the head and Keelan realised the man had been wearing spectacles and they had melted into the flesh.

Daniel Yip broke out the tiger balm and smeared a little under his nose. He offered some to McReadie and Keelan.

The floors of the apartment were bare and the concrete was slick with water from the firehoses. Keelan trod carefully, hoping to keep his socks dry. Shattered glass, pieces of clothing, and charred and twisted metal still littered the floor.

Under the stench of burned flesh Keelan detected the pervading taint of strong chemicals.

The windows of the apartment looked onto the block next door. Keelan saw a Chinese man in an undershirt nailing wood across the windows. The glass in his apartment has been shattered by the blast.

'He must have known,' Keelan said. 'For Christ's sake, when they're making heroin, it stinks.'

Daniel Yip shrugged. 'When you live in one of these old places – this must be one of the first high rises they put up over thirty, forty years ago – you get accustomed to bad smells. Believe me, I know. I grew up in a dump just like this one. Besides, if you asked him why he didn't report anything, he would say to you: "None of my business." When you have to live like this, you learn from a child to protect your own privacy by guarding other people's. Anyway, the Chinese are afraid of the police. There's a saying: "When you die don't go to hell, while you're alive don't go to the police".'

'Confucius?'

Daniel Yip thought for a moment. 'No, I think it was my mother.'

The ambulance crew zipped up the body bag. McReadie stood up. 'Heroin factory. Christ. Must have been amateurs.'

'Any others?' Keelan asked.

'They took three other bodies away just before we arrived. This one took longer. All the wee bits weren't in the same place.'

'Nice job they've got,' Keelan said, watching the ambulance crew carry the stretcher out of the door.

'Almost as good as ours,' McReadie said.

They went back into the corridor. A uniformed policeman was interrogating a tiny Chinese woman in a flower-patterned skirt and an ancient Batman T-shirt. Her plaintive sing-song

whine matched her mood. The policeman was retreating, his notebook and pen still held in front of him.

'What's she saying?' Keelan asked Yip.

'She says she has water all over the floor of her apartment and her furniture's ruined and she wants to know who's going to pay for it.' Yip stepped between the policeman and the woman. There was a rapid exchange in Cantonese. Although they stood just inches away from each other Yip and the woman seemed to be yelling at each other as if they were on opposite sides of a basketball court.

'He's asking her why she didn't report these men's activities to the police,' McReadie said.

'And what did she say?'

'That it's none of her business.'

Yip turned round, looked at Keelan and McReadie, and shrugged.

On the way back to Victoria, McReadie explained to Keelan the significance of what he had just witnessed. 'I wanted you to see this. Perhaps it gives you some idea of what we're up against. What you're up against too, now.'

'Most of the heroin that comes through here is refined in Burma, using *chiu chao* chemists – they call them cooks – sent out from Hong Kong. But every now and then we still stumble across one of these damned things. Instead of the Burma hills, they make the stuff right here in the middle of the city. They must have been freelancing.'

'They blew themselves up?'

'Sure. Easy to do. Even an experienced chemist can make a mistake. But when this happens it's usually some hungry young kid who's spent a few months helping in a triad laboratory and thinks he knows it all.'

'How long had it been operating?'

'Not long. The CID guys checked with the watchman on the block. Three weeks ago two guys came to see him, said they saw an advertisement for the vacant flat, wanted to rent it. They signed the documents, paid a month in advance, the next day he saw the same two guys and two others moving stuff into the flat. The names could be fictitious, they're checking.

'The point is, they found another one hundred and ninety kilos hidden in the flat, as well as some morphine base. That's one hell of a lot of a money. I would hazard a guess that this morning's event has just ruined someone's day.'

12

Wanchai police station

It was the first time Lacey had ever met Eddie Lau. The last photograph they had on file had been taken after his arrest on the aggravated assault charge, and he was a much altered young man from the lank-haired street thug who sneered back at the camera in the Shatin police station in 1984.

The gleaming black hair was now fashionably styled, short at the sides and long on top, with three thin razor strokes above the ears. He wore black leather Oxfords, grey pin-striped trousers, white linen shirt, buttoned to the neck, and a light grey silk blazer.

As she entered Tyler's office he rose to his feet, smiled warmly and held out his hand.

'Edward Lau,' he said. 'I am delighted and honoured to meet you.'

'Detective Inspector Madeleine Lacey.' Lacey thought it would be petty to ignore the proffered hand and attempted a perfunctory handshake. Instead Eddie placed his left hand on top of hers to make the greeting seem much warmer than it actually was.

Eddie indicated the shambling Englishman in the seat beside him. 'This is my counsel, Charles Randolph.' He wore a dark pin-stripe suit and a tie that indicated membership of the old boy's club of a prestigious English public school.

She knew Randolph only too well. An ex-pat lawyer with an apartment in Central and a cottage with flowers and English prints on the walls high in the hills of Lantau. There were stables on the property and at weekends it was a tea gardens for ramblers and tourists.

Randolph rose slowly and took her hand. 'We are acquainted,'

he said. In fact he had cross-examined her in murder cases three times. It is going to be an effort to be pleasant, Lacey thought.

For a moment Lacey wondered at the contrast between the three men in the room; on appearances, Eddie looked like a young and ambitious lawyer, Randolph like a soon-to-be-retired policeman, and Tyler, with his five o'clock shadow and shirtsleeves, like the criminal.

Tyler indicated a chair beside his desk. Lacey sat down. 'Mister Lau arrived downstairs half an hour ago with Mister Randolph. He heard that we were anxious to interview him and he has volunteered to help us with our enquiries.'

'How very decent of him,' Lacey said.

The irony was not lost on Randolph. 'Indeed. In fact, my client has behaved very correctly.' He turned to Tyler. 'Which is more than can be said for your department, Chief Inspector.'

Tyler ignored the remark and opened the file on the desk in front of him. 'Mister Lau, where were you on the 3rd of April, at around one-fifteen in the afternoon?'

Randolph answered for him. 'He was playing mah-jongg at a club in Temple Street in Yaumatei. There are seven corroborating witnesses.'

'That's odd,' Lacey said. 'There's a man called Li Kam-chuen lying in the Adventist Hospital in Stubbs Road who saw him outside the Wanchai Mah-jongg Club in Hennessey Road. The meeting is impressed on this gentleman's memory because Mister Lau was holding a rather large meat cleaver. He almost severed Mister Li's left arm with it.'

Eddie's smile did not slip. He gave Lacey a shrug as if to say: Aren't I a naughty little boy? Lacey realised with disgust that he was trying to flirt with her.

'He's prepared to swear all this in a court of law?' Randolph asked.

'If he lives.'

'Ah,' Randolph said, and crossed his legs. For a moment she thought he was about to pat Eddie's knee, to reassure him that everything was now under his control. 'A ghost.'

'Not quite.'

'You have a warrant for my client's arrest on a count of attempted murder, which is a very serious charge. Do I take it then that if your witness dies you do not have any other evidence?'

'He's not going to die,' Tyler growled.

'Where did you receive your medical training, Chief Inspector?' Randolph refocused his scorn on Lacey. 'May I ask under what circumstances this unfortunate Mister Li chose to accuse my client?'

'When he was in the intensive care unit of the Adventist Hospital, I was able to interview him for . . .'

'I see. At this point, had the doctors administered drugs to relieve the pain?'

There was a heavy silence.

'This unfortunate man babbled something while he was pumped full of narcotics and on this basis you run off to get a warrant. Hardly Maigret, is it? Or should I say, Miss Marple?'

Lacey fought her temper. 'No, and you're not Rumpole of the Bailey.' She leaned forward, her eyes fierce. 'He did it. I know it, and you know it. The same thing he's done to other poor sods a dozen times before. Only this time he messed up. Mister Li is going to live and he's willing to finger him.'

Randolph's complacency remained intact. 'I don't think so.'

Lacey looked at Tyler who nodded. 'Lau Hsu-shui, you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Li Kam-chuen. I must warn you that anything you say . . .'

Randolph nodded impatiently. 'He knows all that. I have advised him only to speak to you in my presence. We're all professionals here, after all.'

'And what's your client's profession?' Tyler said.

Randolph gave him a soft smile. 'When the judge throws this out of court, I shall be advising Mister Lau to sue you for wrongful arrest.'

Eddie took a mother-of-pearl cigarette case from his jacket pocket, opened it and offered Lacey a cigarette.

She shook her head. 'It's an addiction.'

'Everyone has one. Mine is smoking. What's yours?' His eyes were bright. He was playing.

'You make me want to vomit,' she said.

Randolph clicked his tongue. 'Let's all make an effort to be pleasant.'

Eddie put a filtered cigarette between his lips and lit it with a gold Dunhill lighter. He blew the smoke gently towards the ceiling. 'It's all right,' he said to Randolph. 'I am sure we can sort out this misunderstanding like civilised people. Detective Lacey is just doing her job. I am sure it will be a pleasure to have her slap handcuffs on me. For her, as well as me.' He offered her a soft and golden smile.

Randolph picked up the ancient and tattered brown leather briefcase beside his chair. 'Well, let's get this farce over with,' he said. 'But you people really are making a very grave error.'

13

Adventist Hospital

Li lay in a private room, with an armed policeman guarding the door. As Chan had prophesied, his left arm had been amputated just below the shoulder. His torso and the stump of the amputation were still heavily bandaged, an intravenous tube leading to a catheter in his right forearm. His skin was chalky, stretched tight over his face, so that it resembled a parched yellow skull. It reminded Tyler of one of the mummified Egyptian relics he had seen as a schoolboy in the British Museum.

As he and Lacey entered the room the fisherman's eyes flickered open. Tyler took out his identity wallet and held it in front of Li's face. Li gave a whimper of protest.

'My name's Chief Detective Inspector Martin Tyler,' he said, 'I'm in charge of the Serious Crimes Squad in Wanchai.'

Li stared at him with a mixture of awe and terror.

'This is Detective Inspector Madeleine Lacey. She has spoken with you before. You might not remember.'

'You are double lucky, grandfather,' Lacey said, in Cantonese.

Li scowled at her. His voice was dry and cracked. 'With what great cleverness do you deduce that?'

'You are alive.'

'Life is a gift to the rich and a burden to the poor.' There was a small paper cup beside the bed, containing a little water. He nodded towards it. Lacey held it to his mouth and moistened his lips.

'What did he say?' Tyler asked her.

'We're still talking philosophy at this stage, sir.' Lacey sat down beside the bed. 'We have arrested the man who took off your arm.'

'The doctor?'

She scowled. 'Crazy Eddie Lau.'

Fear danced in the old man's eyes like a flame. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. 'How did you know he did this?'

'You told us. You told me when they brought you in here.'

Li shook his head. 'Not me.'

'You named him. You named Eddie Lau.'

For a moment Li did not appear to have enough air. 'I've never heard of such a man. How could I name him?'

Tyler was growing impatient. 'What's he saying?'

Lacey stood up. 'You were right. He's going to recant.'

'The little shit.'

Lacey had known this would happen but it did not ease the sudden blossoming of her anger. She bent down so that her face was just inches from Li's. 'He wanted to kill you, grandfather. He might still kill you!'

Li dropped his voice to a dry whisper. 'Only if I upset him.'

'He took off your arm!'

'I have another. But a man has only one life. Besides, there is my family to think about.'

'We can put him in prison. We can punish him for doing this! Don't you want that?'

'What does Crazy Eddie say?'

'What the hell does it matter what he says?'

'He said he did this?'

'He says he was in a club in Yaumatei.'

'Then that must be right. He has a better memory than me.'

Lacey stood up, looked at Tyler and shook her head.

'Tell him he's the piss-drinking son of a leper and I spit in his mother's burial urn!' Tyler stamped out of the room. He turned to the policeman on duty at the door and pointed him down the corridor. 'You can report back to headquarters. You're not needed here any more.'

He went to the nurse's station, slapped down his identity wallet. 'I'm here about Li Kam-chuen. In short you can transfer the useless son of a leper to a public hospital. We're not investing another cent in the bastard.'

Lacey caught up with him. 'I'm sorry, sir. I should have waited until we had a written statement. You were right.'

'It's okay, Lace.' He turned back to the startled duty sister. 'And don't bother to change his bedpan!'

Causeway Bay

John Keelan found himself staring at the shadows on the ceiling. He turned his head to the luminous dial of his wristwatch, on the bedside table. Half-past two.

He was wide awake. He knew, from experience, that it was pointless to try and get back to sleep. He got up and padded barefoot to the kitchen, and made a cup of coffee.

His Causeway Bay apartment was cramped. He could have fitted most of it into the living room of his home in Berkeley. The air conditioner did not seem to be working properly, and the atmosphere in the little flat reminded him of the 747 after the trans-Pacific flight. There was condensation on the walls, and the robes smelt of mildew.

. . . If only he had taken the money.

If he had taken the money nothing would have changed. There was never a chance of finding the shooter, and the man who paid for it went free. The trial that would have perhaps given the whole thing meaning was thrown out of court.

So what difference had it all made? If he had taken the money they had offered him, nothing would have changed. Except his wife and daughter would still be alive.

He didn't want to think, didn't want to go through it all again. He turned on the television. A Cantonese feature on Jade. *Scarface* on World. A gangster getting shot up in his own home. Life imitates art.

He switched it off, and threw the remote on the table. He got up and wandered over to the window, stared over the harbour towards Kowloon. A few cars still moving on the flyovers, and in Wanchai the USS *Saratoga* was strung with lights. The splash of neon reflected in the black water, the roll-call of Japanese industry that had changed the face of Asia; Sony, Sanyo, Nikon.

Suddenly he found his hand was shaking and he experienced the familiar tightness in his throat and the deep, cold aching pain in his chest. They were gone. He could not accept it, could never accept that it was real.

They were gone.

Every day they slipped a little further away, every day it was a little harder to visualise them, to hear their voices. He snatched at memories with fingertips.

There was no God, no justice. They were gone, and *he* was still alive, still doing deals. May his soul rot in hell. Only there wasn't a hell. And if there was, this was it, he was living in it, they were all living it. A place where only evil could thrive.

There was a cold and lacerating pain in his chest. He couldn't breathe, suddenly assailed by this hopeless and numbing sense of loss. He hung his head and took some deep, long breaths, trying to gather himself. You should have taken the money, he said aloud.

'WHY DIDN'T YOU TAKE THE MONEY?'

He threw his cup against the wall and the coffee leaked down the plaster. It reminded him of another kitchen, another stain, and his hands clenched into fists and he wanted to scream, to hit. He wanted to kill.

But there was no target and so he swallowed it down, sinking to his haunches on the carpet. You should have taken the money, he whispered.

If you had taken the money it would all have been just the same.

14

Wanchai police station

Tan Kua-feng sat across the table from Lacey in the interrogation room and made a Herculean effort to focus his eyes. He mumbled something in Cantonese.

'What did he say?' Tyler asked Lacey.

'He says he killed Li Kam-chuen.'

Tyler had a Big Mac, a fries and a chocolate thickshake on the desk. He took the Big Mac out of its polystyrene box and started to eat. It was an appalling sight. Lacey was happy to return her attention to Tan, reminding him that Li was indeed alive, if not well, in the Adventist Hospital.

Tan stared at her, barely comprehending what was being said to him. He coughed, the wet, hacking sound of the addict. He rubbed his forearm across a dripping nose and then folded his hands between his legs, rocking back and forward on the metal chair. He was an unprepossessing creature in a filthy T-shirt and trousers one size too small. The fly was open and his shirt protruded. His feet were bare and filthy.

A user. Number four heroin. Lacey could see the track marks along the insides of his arms.

'I don't think you had anything to do with the attack on Li. Did you?'

Another mumbled interchange.

'Repeat please,' Tyler said and took another bite out of his hamburger.

'He says that Li insulted his grandmother on his father's side. He says he is very sorry and he didn't mean to kill him.'

'Jesus Christ.'

Lacey drummed on the table with her fingers. This was

bizarre, but not totally unexpected. 'Why are you lying to us?' she said to Tan.

'I don't understand,' Tan answered.

'Do you even know where the attack on Mister Li took place?'

But Tan gave the time and place correctly. He had been well coached. Lacey could imagine the deal; they would arrange free heroin for him inside the prison for as long as he needed it, providing he did as they asked. For Tan it was better to be supplied inside prison than shiver on the street without it. Lacey had once asked an addict what the pain of withdrawal was like. He had asked her if she had ever had a really bad toothache; he said it was like that, only the ache took over your whole body.

This Tan was only dimly aware of the crime to which he was confessing. The triads owned people like this body and soul.

Lacey rubbed her eyes with her hands. Eddie Lau had not only made a mockery of the system, he had patronised her. Not content just to walk away, he had thrown them a few crumbs in the shape of this pathetic creature in front of them. Like feeding chickens.

Tyler finished his afternoon tea. 'We're wasting our time here,' he said, and got up and walked out. He took his fries and the thick shake with him.

'We know you're lying,' Lacey said to Tan and followed her boss out of the door.

Tan Kua-feng lived in a crumbling tenement off O'Brien Road. His home was a tiny room under a stairwell, his front door a piece of cardboard packing. Brian Kwok kicked it aside and crouched down. He smelled urine, damp and sweat. He swore harshly under his breath and switched on a torch.

There was a bamboo mat, a dirt encrusted T-shirt, and – with poignant irony – a plastic shopping bag from Lane Crawford, one of Hong Kong's premier department stores. Cockroaches scattered into the corners at the sudden intrusion of light. In the corner a rat feasted on some crumbs of rice and the remains of a chicken bone that protruded from a red and white Kentucky Fried Chicken box.

The rat and Colonel Sanders stared back at Kwok with similar expressions.

Lacey peered in over his shoulder. 'Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.'

'Think that is a rat or a dog?'

'I'm not sure. Bring it out here, and let's have a look.'

'I suppose, as you're the inspector, you want me to get in there?'

'No, I'll go, if you want.'

Kwok looked around at Lacey. She meant it, he decided. Nothing as tough or as stubborn as a *gwaipo* woman with something to prove. If he wanted to, he could really take advantage. 'No, you will lose big face,' he said. 'I'll do it.'

He put on two pairs of latex gloves – too easy for a piece of glass to slice through one layer – and crawled inside on his hands and knees. He wouldn't be able to wear this suit again. 'Fantastic fucking job I got here,' he muttered.

The rat scuttled into the shadows, but he sensed its presence. *Dew neh loh moh*! the smell. How could a person live like this? He sorted through the Lane Crawford bag with elaborate care, dreading a needle stick injury. Inside was a pair of threadbare trousers, a soiled Rugby Sevens T-shirt commemorating the 1990 competition, a tin spoon and a tourniquet. And there, right at the bottom, was what he had been looking for.

He shouted over his shoulder for Lacey to pass him the plastic evidence bag.

The meat cleaver had an engraved ivory handle, the blade protected by a hand-made cardboard sheath. 'Very nice,' he said, and examined it in the torchlight. He could make out the rusty stains of dried blood, found a small chip in the razor-sharp blade. He replaced it carefully in the sheath, and finished his search of the rest of Tan's 'home', but found little else besides two used syringes and a three-year-old copy of the *South China Morning Post*. He crawled backwards out of the crawl space. He dropped the weapon into the evidence bag.

'We'll get that straight to forensics,' Lacey said.

Kwok stripped off the gloves. 'They will find Tan's fingerprints, even some matching blood. Eddie is very cautious, very thorough guy.'

'What if we don't arrest Tan? We know he's been set up.'

'Then maybe his friend Randolph will phone the press, tell them a big triad guy is still free because of police corruption.' He rummaged in his jacket pocket and found his cigarettes. 'Look at my trousers. You know a good Chinese laundry?'

15

The bar was lit with strobe, gloomy dark against a background of reflective glass panels on the walls. Filipina girls in lycra body suits gyrated on a small stage, while others patrolled behind the bar, flirting with the customers. The sound system pounded out a Prince track, with a heavy, bass rhythm.

'Watch Rose,' McReadie breathed into Keelan's ear.

Rose wore a headband that matched the lilac lycra that clung to her tiny frame. Her body was lithe and sinuous. She bent over, her hair brushing the platform and grinned at McReadie through her spread legs.

'Bonnie wee thing, Rose. You want her tonight?'

Keelan shook his head. 'Tell me about Lacey.'

McReadie shook his head. 'You're wasting your time.'

'I'm just curious.'

'Everybody in the department's been curious. It never got them anywhere. She's married to the job.'

Madonna kicked in with 'Holiday'. Rose finished dancing and the next girl took over. She leaned over the bar and draped an arm around McReadie's neck, whispering something in his ear.

'This is what you need,' McReadie shouted over the throb of the music.

'I'll let you know,' Keelan said.

'You want to know something about Lace? Her father was my brother-in-law. Knew the old boy as well as anyone. He was a CSI back in the seventies, hunted out of Hong Kong by ICAC. They brought him back for trial but nothing was ever proved. He's retired now, lives in London. Never short of a quid, they reckon. But as I say, nothing was ever proved.'

'So what are you saying?'

'I remember when I first started with the force, one day

I found a brown envelope in my desk. It had twenty pounds in it. No note, no explanation, no one ever said a word to me about it. But there it was, every week, twenty pounds. Then one day I arrested this fellow after a triad chop. The station sergeant came up to me and said: "I don't think we have enough evidence." I knew I had him cold, but what was I supposed to do? If you made a prick of yourself in those days you got posted to the Chinese border to watch the ducks shit in between the barbed wire. So I said, yes sir, you must be right. And that was the end of it. Is that corruption, John?'

Keelan thought about the one hundred thousand dollars he had been offered. In the end he figured someone else must have taken it. And Anna and Caroline were dead.

'I don't know, Mac.'

'Of course ICAC have wiped all that out. It's not like it used to be, all those millionaire Chinese station sergeants they had in the seventies. But it's always been hard to be squeaky clean in Asia. When they first installed communal lavatories in Hong Kong, people used to sit on them until someone paid them to get off. It wasn't that long ago that the fire brigade asked for "squeeze" to turn their hoses on. And off. Tea money, squeeze, cumshaw, call it what you like, it's a part of life here. You know what the Chinese think of as corruption? Paying someone to fix something for you, and then they don't fix it.'

'But we have to be cleaner than anyone else.'

'Right, John. That's the thing, isn't it? It doesn't matter that the politicians and the pillars of the community are up to their double fucking chins in graft; because we're cops we have to be more than human.'

'You started off telling me about Lace.'

'Well, that's her, John. She wants to be more than human. Because of her old man, you see. Let's have another drink.'

Rose, deprived of McReadie's attention, wandered away to talk to another customer. Keelan looked over the big policeman's shoulder and saw a Chinese girl in a red silk cheongsam walking towards them. He guessed she was barely five feet tall in her heels, but she was strikingly beautiful, her short black hair swept back from her face, accentuating her high cheekbones and heart-shaped mouth.

Too much make-up for Keelan's taste, but he found he could not take his eyes away from her.

She leaned over McReadie's shoulder and kissed the air near his cheek. McReadie looked around and grinned with pleasure. He put an arm around the hour-glass waist and pulled her towards him. She smiled, but Keelan could tell she was concerned that he was about to wrinkle her dress.

They spoke rapidly in Cantonese.

McReadie turned to Keelan. 'John, I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. Ruby Wen.'

She held out a manicured hand and Keelan took it. Her hand was small and soft and cold.

'Is this another of your little baby dolls?' Keelan said.

'Does she look like it?'

'She looks like a high class hooker. Admire your taste, though.'

McReadie smiled. 'Actually, she's a ghost, John. A spy. Goes to show, never can tell.'

Keelan took in the Mikimoto pearl bracelet, the Gucci watch with the blue-dyed crocodile-skin band. Not the usual image of a Confidential Informant, which was how the DEA characterised them. 'I had a CI in the States. He had one eye and body odour.'

'Well there you are. You've got to pick your informers more carefully.'

More Cantonese. They seemed to find something amusing. Keelan felt like the victim in a whispering conspiracy. 'What is she saying?'

'She says you're very handsome. The usual bullshit.'

Keelan shook his head. 'Tell her I'm not buying. But don't let me stop you. I could do with an early night. Take her home and screw your brains out if you want.'

Ruby Wen pursed her lips. 'Anybody round here screwed their brains out,' she said, in English, 'it's you.'

Keelan stared at her in confusion. She made another speech in Cantonese and walked away.

When Keelan looked back at McReadie, he was laughing. 'What was the rest of it?'

'Something about your sexual habits and turtles. Have a way with women, don't you, John?'

'Why didn't you warn me?'

'Seeing an agent of a friendly country make a complete pig's ass of himself is one of the few pleasures left in life. She's a triad too, you know. Well connected with Eddie Lau.'

'A girl of many talents.'

'Indeed. Now drink your beer. You're buying.'

Less than two hundred metres away Tyler walked into Lacey's office in the Wanchai police station. She was punching out a report on the electric typewriter in a corner of the room. He threw a piece of paper on her desk.

'Forensics report,' he said. 'Read it and weep.'

Lacey examined it briefly. No surprises; she hadn't expected any. Xia's fingerprints were all over the carved handle and the bloodstains matched a sample taken from Li Kam-chuen. A sliver of metal taken from Li's humerus bone by the surgeon was identical to the fragment missing from the blade.

'Very neat.'

'This sort of thing makes you want to spit, but don't let it get to you.'

'Right.'

He went to the window. He scratched at the stubble on his neck that he had missed shaving. 'We will get him eventually. Only time's running out. God knows what's going to happen when Beijing takes over.'

'Same thing that's happened in Shenzhen probably.'

A pleasant prospect, Tyler decided. 'Thought about what you're going to do?'

'I was born here. I might stay, test the water for a while.'

'No place for a woman when the Chinese take over. They'll make you bind your feet.'

'Don't be racist.'

'I've had enough of the bloody Chinese. I've been here twenty-three years and I still feel like I've landed on the moon.'

'So what are you going to do in '97?'

'Last time I was back in the mother country I took a liking to Dorset. My great-grandparents were from there. If prices hold we'll get a few bob for the apartment. I'll have twenty years up and some of my pension. Should be enough to buy a little farm. Go back to the land. Get a pair of wellies and a walking-stick and turn the auld sodde before it turns me. I can't stay here and be told to tremble and obey by Deng and his cronies. Or worse, be told what to do by Eddie Lau.'

'We have the Basic Law,' Lacey said, deadpan, referring to the 1984 agreement which was supposed to guarantee Hong Kong's legal systems for fifty years.

'And I'm the Easter Bunny,' Tyler said.

'Well, I'm prepared to see what happens. Besides, I was born here. Sometimes I feel more Chinese than anything else. Whenever I go back to the UK I feel like a foreigner.'

He looked at his watch. 'Better get home or I'll miss my supper.'

'It's ten o'clock.'

'Never go to bed hungry. It's the secret of good health.'

'You should be the size of a house.' Tyler always amazed Lacey. He ate like a glutton but could not have been more than ten stone, wringing wet.

'My rapid-fire mental processes chew up all the calories.' He stopped at the door. 'Don't worry about Eddie Lau. We'll get him.'

Lacey shrugged. 'Sure,' she said.

16

The phone woke her at half-past one that night. Lacey crawled out from under the duvet and fumbled for the bedside phone. She groaned, expecting it to be Wanchai headquarters. 'Lacey.'

'Detective Lacey?'

'Who is this?' She tried to focus on the luminous dial of her wristwatch. Half-past one. 'Who the hell is this?'

'It's John Keelan. Did I wake you?'

'Of course you woke me. It's the middle of the night. What the hell do you want?'

'Do you know where your uncle lives?'

'I don't think Mac would want to see you at this time of night any more than I do.'

'Actually, he's here with me right now.'

Lacey sat up in bed. 'He's with you? Where?'

'Some place called the Club Manila. Wanchai somewhere. It's pretty dark and there's a lot of music. We're having a cultural experience.'

Lacey closed her eyes. She had heard of McReadie's legendary hospitality to detectives from other forces. 'How bad is he?'

'Pretty bad. He's unconscious.'

'Can't you just take him home with you?'

'I figured I'd check with you first. Like, I know he's married. What's going to be worse for him? Getting home late and tanked or not getting home at all?'

Lacey thought about it. At this time of the morning she could probably get across Central and into Wanchai in a few minutes. She knew from past experience that now she was awake it would take her at least an hour to get back to sleep.

'I'll see you outside in ten minutes,' she said.

* * *

Lacey turned onto Hennessey Road. There was a mist of rain and the windscreen wipers made a plaintive squeak as they scraped across the windshield. Lacey spotted the purple neon-lit sign for the Club Manila and pulled over. Keelan appeared, one of McReadie's arms slung over his shoulder.

'Good evening, Detective Lacey,' Keelan said, with exaggerated politeness. He threw open the rear door and poured McReadie into the back seat.

Keelan went around the car and jumped in beside her.

'What did you do to him?' Lacey said.

'You know how it is. One thing led to another.' Keelan brushed the rain from his jacket, the same one he had been wearing that morning in the bar.

'How many has he had?'

Keelan shrugged. 'He had seven Scotches in the 699. After that, I wasn't counting.'

'You mean you've been with him since lunchtime?'

'Male bonding. Like you said, Detective Lacey.'

'How is it you're still sober?'

'I've been putting in a lot of training in the last year. Anyway, I'd hardly say I'm sober.'

Lacey put the car into gear and drove away.

McReadie lived in Stanley, a leafy and upmarket residential area on the south side of the island. Lacey helped Keelan carry him through the lobby of his apartment building and into the elevator.

'How well do you get on with your aunt?' he asked her.

'Not great.'

'She may not thank you for this. Let me do it. I don't have to talk nice to her every Christmas.'

He dragged McReadie down the hall. She heard a door open, a few muttered words of apology from Keelan, a woman's voice, harsh with anger and embarrassment. Then the door slammed again.

He got back in the lift.

'Where to now?' she said.

'It's all right. I'll take a taxi.'

'Oh, please,' Lacey said. 'It's almost half-past two. I'm up now. Where do you need to go?'

'Causeway Bay.'

'It's on the way,' she lied.

They drove in silence. From the corner of her eye Lacey noticed him toying with the plain gold band on the third finger of his left hand. 'What will your wife say?' she asked him.

'She won't say anything.'

'A good wife.' Lacey wondered why she was baiting him. Something about him gnawed at her; something about his attitude, the way he could be with people and behave as if he was alone. She thought he was arrogant and rude. She wanted an excuse to tell him so.

'The best wife a man ever had,' Keelan said.

'She'd have to be.'

He didn't respond. He turned back to the window and watched the rain mist the window, blurring the corridors of neon. At this time of the morning there were just a few taxis and private cars moving on the street.

'Tell me the truth. How is it McReadie's so drunk and you're not? Did you spike his drink?'

He turned and looked at her for a long time. 'What did you say?'

'Didn't you hear me?'

'I was . . . I was thinking about something else.'

'Sorry I'm such boring company for you.'

'You didn't have to do this. I was happy to catch a cab.'

Lacey shook her head and concentrated on the road. She lost all interest in talking to him. They passed the Tai Tam reservoir in the darkness, reached Chai Wan and turned on to the Eastern Corridor.

'Where do you live?'

'Harbour View apartments. Causeway Bay. Do you know it?'

'I did a case there.'

'Yeah?'

'Homicide. An ex-pat. Killed his wife, chopped her up

and tried to flush her body down the lavatory a bit at a time.'

'Which apartment?'

'Isn't it better not to know?'

'I was wondering because I'm having a little trouble with the plumbing.'

She looked around, tried to fathom his expression in the dashboard light. He was smiling.

A few minutes later she pulled over in front of the apartments on Gloucester Road. 'Hey, thanks,' he said.

'Just looking after the family.'

'If I have to get the plumber in, I'll let you know.'

'Case is closed.' She drove away, clashing the second gear.

17

Lacey arrived at police headquarters at eight-thirty the next morning. She and Tyler had an eight forty-five appointment with the assistant commissioner to discuss the Li Kam-chuen case. As she was a few minutes early she got off the elevator on the tenth floor and dialled McReadie's extension in Narcotics.

McReadie was already in his office, sorting through a sheaf of faxes that had come in during the night. His powers of recuperation amazed Lacey. He looked fine. The lines around his eyes were etched a little deeper, but otherwise there were no scars. He was holding a coffee mug. It said: 'This is not baldness. This is a solar panel for a sex machine.'

'Hi, Lace.' He raised an eyebrow. 'You look peaky. Big night last night?'

He didn't even remember. 'Didn't sleep very well,' she said. 'How about you?'

'Like a baby. Few drinks with your friend Keelan then an early night.'

Lacey was all wide eyed innocence. 'Oh?'

'It's all right,' McReadie said. 'I was discreet.'

'Great.'

'He's an interesting man.'

'Is he?'

'Yeah.' And then he added: 'I think he likes you.'

'Fantastic. I was really looking forward to being ogled by another married man.'

'Aye, well.'

Lacey turned for the door. 'By the way, I know he's a lieutenant in the DEA but is he on drugs?'

'No, you're thinking of the CIA.' McReadie had his sense of humour back.

'I have a three-year-old niece in England with a longer attention span.'

McReadie shrugged. 'He's not everything he seems. Must tell you about him some time.'

'I can't wait,' Lacey said.

'You know, Lace,' he called after her, 'you should get out more often. Enjoy yourself more.'

'Yes, Dad,' she called back. She got back in the elevator and joined Tyler outside the assistant commissioner's office.

18

The Sze Hoi perched on the roof of the Austin Commercial Building, overlooking the unwinking red and gold and purple neon of Nathan Road and the dark shadow of Kowloon Park. There were several large square rooms, lit by chandeliers like a French casino. The restaurant was crowded, and there was a queue of people waiting at the reception. Like every popular Chinese restaurant the noise was deafening, waiters shouting as they scurried in and out of the kitchens, the small children screaming and running between the tables, the clatter of plates and the anonymous lilt of Chinese music on the sound system. Whole families surrounded some of the larger circular tables, from very small children to wizened patriarchs in jackets two sizes too large.

A spiral staircase, roped off with a red velvet cord, led to an upper floor. It was a banqueting hall, similar to the one below, but the lights were muted and the tables were empty except for a single circular table in the very centre of the room. Here the proprietor of the Sze Hoi, Eddie Lau, dined in private with Ruby Wen and two of his close associates, Vincent Tse and The Onion.

Vincent Tse was very thin and very tall. His nickname was Chopstick. He had a smooth well-sculpted face and elegantly styled hair. He wore a brown tweed Armani suit jacket over a soft cashmere turtleneck, and a Patek Phillippe wristwatch with a slim gold band on his wrist. The image was not deceptive, for Vincent was what he appeared to be – an accountant. In a formally structured triad he would have been White Paper Fan, for that was the function he performed for Eddie Lau, financial counsellor and business manager. His other nickname was Abacus; the Human Calculator.

It was not difficult to understand why Tak Kam-chau had

been nicknamed The Onion. A large man, all his weight seemed to have been distributed around his belly and his hips, giving him the rolling gait of a fat woman. But The Onion was no figure of fun; his reputation precluded any jokes being made at his expense. And for those who did not know The Onion's past, or his relationship with Crazy Eddie Lau, the emptiness behind the eyes was warning enough.

He wore black crocodile-skin loafers with white socks, grey trousers, a black silk shirt and a canary yellow blazer with a black paisley pattern. Thugs on parade, Ruby thought, with distaste.

A waiter hurried from the kitchen bearing a dish that was one of the restaurant's specialities, Monk Jumping Over the Wall, a fragrant blending of abalone, chicken, ham, mushrooms and herbs; legend had it that a monk had once broken his vows of vegetarianism and leaped the high wall of his monastery after sniffing the aromas of the dish from a distance.

As they ate Eddie kept up a monologue, discussing his latest passion, the East Wind, a pleasure junk he had just bought from an executive at Jardine's who was returning to England. He was having it refitted at a cost of over one million Hong Kong dollars, its salon stripped and refurbished in polished walnut and leather.

As he talked Ruby and Vincent maintained an uneasy silence. Ruby felt the other man's eyes on her, felt his silent enmity. It gave her a mute satisfaction.

After the meal the waiter brought a bottle of Courvoisier and Eddie dismissed him with a nod. They were alone in the cavernous restaurant, the riotous noise from downstairs in counterpoint to the restrained gloom of the banqueting hall. Facing the windows, Ruby could see the bright towers of Tsim Sha Tsui.

Eddie, through force of habit, faced the doors.

'So what are the murmurs on the wind?' he said to Ruby.

'Someone whispered your name to the DEA in Bangkok,' she said.

Eddie's face tightened. 'Who?'

'Do not know. Maybe Louis Huu.'

'Has to be Louis Huu,' Vincent said, but his eyes were on Ruby Wen. Disdain and suspicion written there, she saw.

'Everyone is watching you now, *tai lo*,' Ruby said, using the triad honorific, 'we must be very cautious.'

Eddie lit a cigarette, his foot tapping in irritation at this new setback. Louis Huu was his supplier in Bangkok, son of one of the major *chiu chao* dealers in Thailand. He had been buying base and number four from him in small quantities for almost a year. But he had refused to pay for this latest consignment, the biggest yet, the one that Li Kam-chuen had lost. He was not going to pay for what he did not receive.

'Huu family thinks you are cheating them,' Vincent said, his voice flat.

Eddie nodded. 'Lose my heroin, lose my connection in Bangkok. Now I have DEA sniffing at my rump like a dog.' He kept his gaze fixed on Ruby. 'Ruby thinks she knows who steals our powder.'

Vincent and The Onion turned towards her.

Ruby took a deep breath. 'A week ago there was a big explosion in an apartment in Kwun Tong estate. Four men were killed. They were trying to refine base into powder. One of the men was Martin Fong, a Sun Yee On cook.'

Ruby smiled. Like all good lies, it had its basis in truth. Martin Fong was Sun Yee On. How could she use one of her own triad to betray Eddie Lau?

The Onion slapped his fist into his palm. 'It is time we put our horses on the street to settle this.'

Eddie looked at Vincent, who shook his head. 'I would still like more proof before we start a war with the Sun Yee On.'

'How much more proof do you want?' The Onion said. He would have said more but he would not incite Eddie's anger. Everyone knew Vincent Tse was a tail wagger and had no ginger for men's work.

Eddie smiled and put an arm around Vincent's neck. 'Look after the profits, Ah Lam,' he said, using his familiar name. 'Let me look after the wars. The Ox has been testing our strength in Mongkok and Wanchai. It makes sense that he now steals our powder. In his interest to cause discord between ourselves and Louis Huu.'

'Still think we should have more proof,' Vincent said, looking hard at Ruby.

'Ruby is never wrong,' Eddie said. He was silent for a moment, the smoke from his cigarette coiling towards the ceiling like incense. 'DEA are a much bigger problem.'

'Not just DEA. We also have customers in the Golden Mountain waiting for their powder,' Vincent pointed out.

'I will find another supply. Meanwhile Ruby will go to the Golden Mountain and explain this delay, offer a discount to our customers if they will wait a few more weeks. Okay, Ruby-ah?'

Ruby nodded.

'We will also take our revenge on the Sun Yee On. But not in the street.'

The Onion frowned. This was not what he wanted to hear.

'I have a ghost inside the Sun Yee On, very close to The Ox. He will tell us when there is a trawler coming to Hong Kong and we will pass this information to the yellow air. Okay, Ruby-ah?'

The conversation continued in whispers for another half an hour. Finally Ruby rose to leave.

'I will walk you to the elevator,' Eddie said.

Vincent's face tightened in a scowl.

'Good night, Vincent,' Ruby said sweetly, but he did not reply.

There were two of Eddie's horses waiting in the foyer outside the banqueting hall. They fell into step behind him.

'Hold it here,' he said, as the lift doors opened.

The elevator cars soared along the outside of the buildings, the outer walls made of reinforced plexiglass. It afforded giddying views over Kowloon. Ruby stepped into the elevator and stared down at the teeming crowds and the jam of traffic, her hands gripping the chrome rail.

Eddie stood close behind her. She smelled his cologne, Versaille Pour Homme. He put his arms about her waist, and his smooth face was against her cheek.

'Look at them down there,' he whispered. 'They don't exist

for us. Like ants crawling around a honeypot. We are gods, you and I. While they struggle and sweat, we do what we want. Yes. Do what we want.' His hands lifted the hem of her black skirt and rolled her silk underpants down her thighs.

'What are you doing?' she whispered. Her voice was hoarse with fear and excitement. He was pressed hard against her, and she could not move from the elevator rail. He was not a big man, but he was strong, very strong. She looked around. Over his shoulder she saw one of the four-nine boys, his back to her, leaning against the elevator doors, jamming them open. His associate had disappeared.

'Look at them down there, Ruby-ah. They have to scrape and beg for the things they want. All their lives they struggle for the scraps of poor food they want to eat, for the little holes in the wall where they live. When they pray, they pray to us.'

She gasped as she felt his heat between her legs.

'No one can see us, Ruby-ah. We can see all of Kowloon, but they cannot see us. We are too high. They never crane their necks to look up. They spend their whole lives with their heads down, captured in their own little worlds.'

He entered her suddenly. For Ruby the excitement was too much. It was not the physical sensation – it was too quick, and too painful to be pleasant – but something that took place in the black and swirling recesses of her mind; the exposure of her own body, the thrill of being seen, being watched, by the bodyguard perhaps, by all of Kowloon spread below her in the night. The risk, always the risk.

Yet, he was right, no one ever looked up. Not in this city.

Eddie was breathing hard in her ear, and his movements were becoming increasingly urgent. 'Is this like it is for the gods, Ruby-ah?' he whispered. 'If someone down there should look up, what will they see? The coming together of two gods.'

He stopped suddenly and without warning, before the Rain, both hands clenched on the rail either side of her. She heard his breathing, ragged in her ear.

There was no physical release for her either. She was

left with the hangover from the physical buffeting, her only consolation the mental exhilaration, the rose-glow of the fantasy he had created for her in her head, a narcotic high that left her feeling omnipotent.

She felt him withdraw, still hard, still unspent. 'The gods must preserve their *yang*, their vital essence,' he said. 'It is from this they draw their strength.'

She heard him zip his trousers. Then he pulled up her underwear and kissed her gently on the nape of her neck. When she turned around her mouth was open and they kissed, the wetness of their tongues coiled together.

He pulled away. 'Go,' he said to the bodyguard.

Eddie leaned against the elevator doors. 'Listen to the wind,' he said to her. 'Tell me what whispers you hear.'

She nodded.

'Vincent wants to kill you,' he said as the elevator doors closed.

19

Statue Square is Hong Kong's Trafalgar Square, the hub around which the wheel of the city once turned. Years ago it faced directly onto the harbour, overlooked by the green hills of the island, its perimeters bounded by the embodiments of those institutions on which the colony had been founded; Government House, the Anglican cathedral, the Hong Kong Club and a statue of Queen Victoria.

It was greed that fuelled the Empire, and it was greed that had subsumed its relics in the twilight of the century. Today a three-storey car park has risen between the square and the harbour; the cathedral and Government House have disappeared behind the concrete towers of Central, and the Hong Kong Club is now hidden away in four storeys of a twenty-four-storey office block. The famous cricket ground has petrified into a municipal garden, mainly concrete, and the statue of the old girl from which the square derived its name is now gone.

Hong Kong, founded on borrowed soil and borrowed time, was never a place with tenderness for its past.

McReadie waited on the far end of the square, in the shadow of the futuristic highrise of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. Ruby Wen arrived at just before ten-thirty, half an hour late, tottering across the square in black leather pumps.

She looks as if she was melted down and poured into her jeans, McReadie thought. We look like an under-age tart and her middle-aged client.

'You're late,' he grumbled, but did not expect her to respond. He put his hands in his pockets and started to walk. She fell into step beside him.

'Never get up so early,' Ruby said. 'It is just dawn.'

'It's half past ten.'

'Still early, never mind.' She rummaged in her Cartier handbag for her cigarettes and offered him one. He shook his head.

'You've cut your hair.'

'Got lucky forehead. Too much hair before. You like?'

'It's all right,' McReadie said, never one to lavish a compliment unnecessarily.

'Very expensive. Two thousand Hong Kong.'

McReadie ran a hand across his own skull, the grey hair thinning and plastered across the crown. 'Now you've got as much hair as me, and it didn't cost me anything.'

'But you never have men want to make dirty stuff wif you all the time.'

'I sincerely bloody hope not,' McReadie growled, the Scottish brogue more pronounced when his masculinity was offended.

It was a Sunday morning and Statue Square had been invaded by the Filipina maids of Hong Kong, as it was every Sunday, their traditional day off. They flocked into the heart of Central in their thousands, like gulls, singing and shouting and chattering to each other in Tagalog. More of them were swarming from the MTR and off the ferries to take up their posts on benches and on the edges of fountains all over the square. They brought with them in their shopping bags their playing cards and radios and home-cooked lunches and posed for photographs to send home to their families in Quezon and Manila.

'What have you got for me, Ruby?' McReadie asked her.

'South wind whispers there is big shipment of number four, heya. Thai trawler wif two hundred kilo of white powder.'

'When?'

'Three nights. Transfer to fishing boat called *Tai Pak*. Sail back to Aberdeen that night.'

McReadie nodded, his face betrayed nothing, but secretly he was elated. Two hundred kilos of number four would be a major public relations victory.

'Pay me twenty-five thousand, okay?'

'We both know the rules, Ruby.'

She nodded and walked away across the square. McReadie watched her go. He wondered how she came by the information. He had no doubt he was being used as part of an internecine rivalry. But for two hundred kilos of number four heroin, he didn't really care.

20

The new town of Shatin was a vastly different place from the village she had grown up in. Now the skyline was dotted with cranes, pulling dismal concrete towers into the sky, the new housing estates for the burgeoning population of factory workers who were moving out of Hong Kong to the territories. Clumps of apartment buildings weaved along the shores of the Shing Mun river channel and followed gullies up into the mountains, where they crammed in blocks on every flat space, thickets of television aerials sprouting from their roofs, windows flying the banners of a thousand laundry poles.

Ruby remembered when most of this land had been given over to paddies and bamboo shacks. She had no nostalgia for the past; she did not long to be a barefoot urchin again with snot running out of her nose. The signs of urban march neither depressed or pleased her; she noted the changes with vague contempt. How could anyone live their lives in a shack, or a two-room dormitory apartment miles from the throbbing heart of the city, the nightclubs of Lan Kwai Fong, the restaurants in Tsim Sha Tsui?

Cemeteries with lights on, someone had once described the new towns.

She remembered what Eddie had whispered to her in the elevator. *Look at them down there, Ruby-ah. They have to scrape and beg for the things they want. All their lives they struggle for the scraps of poor food they want to eat, for the little holes in the wall where they live. When they pray, they pray to us.*

She passed a sign with Wo Che Estate written in large red Chinese characters. A crane rose above the concrete skeletons of another block of flats. As a small child she

remembered riding her uncle's water buffalo bare back through here, when it was just a muddy swamp. Now she drove a German sports car. She flicked a switch to retract the hood, to let everyone know it was little Ruby-ah, even though her little village was a city full of strangers now.

We are gods, Eddie had whispered. But sometimes even the gods fell victim to fate. Like Ruby. Like the fortune in white powder that had been destroyed in the explosion in the Kwun Tong housing estate. Because of Martin Fong, that stupid lump of leper turd! She felt the rage come again, her knuckles turning white on the wheel. She still owed money to Peter Mui, five hundred thousand Hong Kong. Eddie would give her the money but she would lose face and Vincent would never let her forget.

Well her problems must wait now until after Ching Ming.

Ching-Ming, the Clear and Bright Festival. A time to tend the graves of your ancestors. A time to go home, a time to pay respect.

Ruby's great-great-grandfather was a Hakka from Po On in Kwangtung province; he had arrived in Hong Kong in 1880, had bought the little plot of land which succeeding generations had tended. Ruby and her brothers and sisters had been the first generations to leave.

She threaded through the melee of traffic on the Tolo Highway. The roads were choked with traffic for Ching Ming; trains, buses, private cars all headed out of the city to the Territories and the new towns. It was a time for that cornerstone of all Chinese life; the family.

The market garden her parents and two of her brothers still toiled over had once been two miles from the centre of the village. Now the new estates were creeping towards them, and the great pylons of the electricity grid had stretched out their long metal arms to encircle them.

It was colder up here, and grey. The mountains were a metallic green, looming over the car, pocked with the scars of quarries now, even the dragons not safe from the entrepreneurs of Hong Kong. She passed a duck farm, thousands of the birds squawking under their awnings of

reed thatch, in the shadow of another giant apartment block under construction right next door.

She turned off the main road and changed down through the gears to bump over an unsealed road that wound up into the hills. She could make out her parents' house now, through wisps of evening mist. It was a crumbling stone cottage, perhaps once a mandarin's *yamen*. The glazed blue tiles were dulled by a century of moss, surrounded by a crumbling bamboo fence falling into a nullah on one side.

She passed a shallow field of water covered with lotus, the banks shaded by eucalyptus. On the other side of the road were fields of yams and taros, and a little plot of peach trees for New Year markets.

The BMW coughed as she changed down to second gear, the purr of the engine hanging on the evening chill. Two children, naked except for short black smocks, stared at her as she drove past.

She stopped the car outside the house and turned off the engine.

A pig rolled on its back in the front yard.

Ruby got out of the car and picked her way through the mud. Her new Gucci sandals would be ruined. The smell was worse than she remembered, cabbage and the ammonia smell of urine.

Pitiful the way they lived out here, Ruby thought. What shame that these people are my family. She dreaded the thought of spending a night in the fetid and cramped little stone house. But she had come anyway, to do her filial duty by her peasant father.

A woman came out of the open door of the house. She was wearing *samfu*, the traditional black cotton pyjamas and a wide – brimmed straw hat with customary black tassels. There was a baby in a sling around her neck. Ruby did not recognise her straightaway. Then she realised who it was. Ah Zheng, her sister. Her *younger* sister.

They stared at each other.

'Ruby-ah,' she said.

Ruby attempted a smile. What do they do with the money I send? she thought. Not throw it all away on clothes, heya. She experienced a flood of both contempt and sorrow and shame. She shifted uncertainly on her heels, wondering if the pig would bite her. She remembered there was a time when she would not have been afraid of a pig.

'Younger Sister,' she managed.

It was only a year since she had been back. Ah Zheng had just been pregnant then, married to some buck-toothed youth with mud between his toes. Father didn't even find her someone from the town. A crowded fifteenth-floor apartment in Shatin would have been better than still sleeping with the pigs. Poor Ah Zheng. That year, and the childbirth, had changed her almost beyond recognition. The pretty little sister she remembered looked beaten and fat.

In a moment she'll whip out a tit and feed the baby like any other Hakka peasant, Ruby thought.

She heard a cry and her mother rushed out of the house. The black veil on her great straw hat flapped as she ran. She was an old woman now, but still large and active, and she almost knocked Ruby off her feet, throwing herself forward, her arms going around Ruby's neck. Ruby felt another surging tide of strange emotion, a sharp stab of guilt.

The old woman was crying now. Her hands had mud on them and the tears and the dirt were on her frock. Ah Zheng was crying too.

Ruby caught her reflection in the small mirror that hung outside the door to deflect evil spirits. She saw herself – or perhaps it was her imagination – standing there with mud on her Italian sandals, the pig with its snout up her Chanel frock.

She felt something drop in her chest when she looked down at her mother; she had lost another tooth.

'So long since you write, *sui lung*,' her mother said, using her childhood pet name for her, 'little dragon'. 'So long since you come to see us! Look at these beautiful clothes! You

must be very rich. You must come and see your father now. He is inside. Come, come!'

She felt a chill in her stomach. Yes, she must kowtow to her father now. Why did she always do this to herself? Why did she always come back?

21

Her father sat in a hard-backed chair in what her mother always referred to as the parlour, the dark front room of the house where the family ate their food and received visitors on festival days. He wore a white vest and the long voluminous blue shorts of a peasant but he sat erect in his chair with the bearing of an emperor. His nut brown face was stern and lined.

He waited for her to kowtow.

Not going to do it, Ruby thought. Nobody kowtows now for half a century, maybe one good thing the communists do, they ban the kowtow. Stupid old man. If he had his way I will have my feet bound when I am born, heya!

'Father,' she said.

'You look like a prostitute.'

Make this effort, Ruby thought. For what, okay? To hear insults from an old peasant. 'A rich prostitute,' she said.

A muscle worked in his jaw. 'Do you have a husband yet?'

'Do not have time for a husband.'

'A woman is nothing until she has a husband.'

'And then she is even less than nothing. That is why I do not get married, heya.'

She looked around. The centrepiece of the room was the family altar, illuminated by a red light bulb. Several sticks of incense smouldered below blurred black-and-white photographs of Ruby's grandfather and grandmother, and an ancient sepia image of her great-grandfather. Below their likenesses were three brightly painted porcelain figures, the gods of health, wealth and happiness, as well as the shapeless clay form of the earth god; all the deities were assembled among the offerings of rice and the miniature of Johnnie

Walker that Ruby had left the previous year, when she came to Shatin directly off a Qantas flight from Bangkok.

In the centre of the room was an ancient mahogany table and four hard-backed chairs. There was little other furniture, except for two threadbare silk carpets on the floor and an antique black-and-white television in a wooden cabinet in the far corner of the room.

What do they do with the money I send them, okay?

'Look at my daughter,' her father was saying to her mother. 'See how she looks, how she dresses. I don't know what sort of marriage I can make for her when she dresses like this.'

Her mother was looking at her with a mixture of awe and trepidation, as she had done all her life, whenever Ruby had defied her father's wishes and was brought before him for chastisement. Ah Zheng's baby started to cry. The pig urinated loudly in the doorway, the water splashing onto the stone porch in a thick yellow stream. Steam rose from the puddle.

'Don't need a husband, father. Got my own life now.'

This absurd notion hung in the air like a blasphemy. The old man's eyes glittered with anger and pain. 'Children today,' he said to his wife, 'have no respect.'

Ruby had brought presents; daypacks stuffed with toys for the children, Rolex watches for her brother and her father, pearl bracelets for her mother and for Ah Zheng. Her father watched the present-giving ceremony in stony silence. The gifts would not be opened in Ruby's presence. It was tradition; if the recipient should appear disappointed, the giver would lose face.

Even my father will not be disappointed with a Rolex, never mind, Ruby thought.

That evening the four men – her father, two of her brothers and Ah Zheng's new husband – ate their dinner at the table, using the only four chairs. The women and children were expected to squat on the floor. Now Ruby wished she had worn her jeans. She was not getting pig shit on her Chanel frock. She was hungry but the slop they were eating – pig's brains stewed in Chinese wine, taros and rice so glutinous

they could have plugged the draughts in the walls with it – was beyond her. She said she wasn't hungry and went outside.

The tonk-tonk of the bullfrogs echoed across the lake.

It was cold up here at night. She got into the BMW, and wound up all the windows. Soon her breath had fogged the glass. She turned on the radio, a rap song. She lit a Dunhill and drew the smoke deep into her lungs.

The pig was rooting in the soft earth behind the fence. Grotesque. Just drive away now, she said to herself. Leave this smelly awful place. Fill up the hot tub in the apartment and get these peasant smells off your skin. She wanted badly to fuck someone, anyone. Especially Eddie. It was her father's doing, calling her a prostitute. She hated the way that old man looked at her. It made her want to shock him more.

What had they done with the money she sent them?

They were talking about her in there. Her father and her brothers and Kei-feng, Little Sister's husband. She didn't like him, didn't like the way he looked at her from under those dark eyebrows, as if he was peering at her from under a drain cover. He had a hungry face and she knew what he wanted. Perhaps she would torment him a little tonight, get a little revenge.

When she went back inside they were all crowded around the television, watching a soap opera, *The Feud Between Two Brothers*. She knew one of the actors, had been to bed with him. She flirted with the idea of saying so.

Once again, the four men had monopolised the only chairs. She was not going to ruin her Chanel on the floor so she sat on the table and crossed her legs. The dress rode up her thigh and she saw Kei-feng's eyes on her. He licked his lips and fidgeted in his chair.

Ruby swung one leg and smiled at her mother, who was glancing fearfully at her father.

Cannot believe I came from this place, she thought. If not for Eddie I would still be here. Eddie showed me what to do to get money, taught me how to speak English, how to drive a car, how to deal the white powder. Still be just a stupid peasant if not for Eddie.

When the soap opera was finished her father stood up and announced that he was going to bed. Ruby glanced at her watch. Nine o'clock. She never went to bed before three.

There were eleven of them living in the house now, and there were only two bedrooms. Ruby was to sleep in the parlour with Little Sister, Kei-feng and their baby. One of her younger brothers shared the room also. Her mother and father slept in one bedroom, and her older brother, Ah Sung, slept in the other with his wife and three young children.

The others went to their rooms. Ah Zheng went to the old mahogany dresser in the corner of the room and pulled out four bamboo mats and unrolled them on the floor. She looked questioningly at Ruby. Kei-feng leered at her. Perhaps he hoped he could roll on top of her during the night and say he had made a mistake.

Ruby shook her head. She went outside to sleep in the car. At least it was clean.

22

It was a two-mile walk to the cemetery, a long trek up the mountainside. Ruby's father went ahead alone, the thin sinewy legs carrying him faster than the others. He approached the festival as he had approached everything in his life, as part of a dour struggle. Ah Sung was behind, his three children dressed in the white shirts and blue shorts of their school uniform. Ruby was last, her Calvin Klein jeans chafing her thighs and slowing her.

They were not alone on the road. It seemed that the whole population of Shatin was making the pilgrimage up the hillside.

Little Sister hung back too, deliberately, the baby asleep in the sling around her neck. Several times Ruby looked up and found her staring. Ruby sensed there was something on her mind, something she wanted to say but did not know how to put into words.

Finally Ruby stopped, out of breath. Only peasants walked. In Hong Kong she never walked anywhere. She should not have worn jeans! Her side was hurting.

She looked back the way they had come. Below them the new town of Shatin looked grey and drab in the overcast of the sky and the mountains. Ah Zheng squatted down by the side of the road to feed the baby.

Ruby waited with her, watched her feed. She wondered if she would ever have babies. She could not imagine feeding a baby like this. Too selfish, Ruby-ah! she told herself. You will have a wet nurse and an amah.

'You ever get letters from Elder Sister?' Ah Zheng asked her suddenly.

Elder Sister was born twelve years before Ruby, born in the year of the tiger like her. She had left too, emigrated to

England with her husband. 'Got one letter,' Ruby said. 'Very rich lady now. Husband has big shop. Live in a big house, got a nice car. Got a lot of face.'

Ah Zheng seemed dismayed to hear this good news. She concentrated her attention on her baby.

'You happy, Little Sister?' Ruby asked her.

'Don't have time to think about being happy.'

'Kei-feng a good husband?'

'Woman cannot live without a husband,' Ah Zheng said, and Ruby heard her father's voice from yesterday.

'This woman can.'

Ruby turned away to light a cigarette. She despised her own history. She should have been born the daughter of a big businessman. She would have gone to school in England, learned how to talk good English, not have all this peasant superstition in her life.

'Maybe you go to England when the *gwailos* leave?' Ah Zheng asked her.

'Maybe.'

'You were always the little dragon. Not afraid, not like me.' She had her head down, squeezing milk from her breast. The baby was wriggling and restless. 'You rich, Ruby-ah?'

Ruby bent over to whisper to her. 'You know that man who plays the mandarin on *The Feud Between Two Brothers*?'

Ah Zheng's eyes went wide. 'You know him?' she said.

Ruby smiled and made the universal sign for coupling, circling the thumb and forefinger of one hand, and moving the index finger of the other rapidly in and out. She laughed.

Ah Zheng stared at her, her face pale. 'You have a lot of luck, Ruby. Always double lucky.'

Ah Zheng would like to be me, Ruby realised, if she had more of the dragon in her. Instead she sits beside the road with a baby sucking her dry. Besides awe, besides the outrage of a simple provincial girl, Ruby read something else in her eyes. It took Ruby a little while to realise what it was.

Hatred.

For the Chinese, future success and happiness is inextricably linked with placating and pleasing the spirits of

dead ancestors. If the dead do not receive proper care and attention they can bring hardship and misfortune on the heads of their children and granchildren. So on the festival of Ching Ming whole families flock to the cemeteries to tend the family graves, and remove the bones of the long dead from their burial urns to be cleaned and polished.

There were already large crowds around the flower stalls ranged outside the porcelain gates. The cemetery faced the water, as demanded by the laws of *feng shui*, in this case the pleasing aspect of Tolo Harbour. In this way the contented dead would continue to promote the fortunes of their still-living descendants in heaven.

The half-moon graves had been cut into the hillside in steep terraces, many adorned with black-and-white photographs of the deceased, some attended by tall earthenware jars that contained family bones.

Her father led the way down the hillside to the family grave site. Ruby knew from past experience that the ceremonies would take most of the day. After they had finished at the cemetery they would return home to remove the bones of her grandparents and great-grandparents from their burial urns to polish and dry them in the sun.

Her grandfather's grave had been neatly tended during the year, testament to the gratuities that her father had paid to the groundsmen through the year. By contrast, many of the surrounding graves were clogged with weeds. Ah Sung's two oldest boys produced trowels from the day packs that Ruby had bought for them and began to pick at the minute weeds that had escaped the groundsmen's attention.

Her father swept a little pile of earth away from the centre of the ground and reached into the canvas bag that he carried over one shoulder. Inside was the paper burial money that he would light as a sacrifice to his father's spirit.

As the family squatted around the grave he formed the paper money into a little pile and lit a match. He touched the flame to the bottom of the pile and the money began to blacken, crinkle and burn.

Ruby felt the blood drain out of her face. The little pile of

money was not the special paper money you could buy in the shops, fifty-million-dollar notes drawn on the Bank of Hell. It was real Hong Kong dollars. Thick rolls of twenty and fifty dollar and red hundred dollar notes.

Her father was watching her. She forced herself to look away from the burning money and into his face. Now she knew where her remittances had gone.

'I know how you make your money,' he said. 'The old ways are not good enough for you any more. You have no respect for your ancestors.'

Ruby fought back an urge to thrust her hand into the fire and pull out the notes. Little waves of heat rose from the grave and the paper crumbled into white ash. 'I send some of the money to your sister in England,' he went on, 'the rest I give to your ancestors and I ask them to forgive you for what you have done.'

Ruby wanted to run away, down the mountain, away from these terrible people. Her father had taken away her face in front of her whole family, and in front of her ancestors. She knew there was no colour left in her cheeks but she forced herself to show no emotion, not to cry or shout or protest.

Her mother prepared a little kerosene stove and cooked some rice and fatty pork dumplings on the grave, and they ate the picnic in silence. Around them other families chattered and shouted with laughter.

Afterwards they left a little rice wine and some of the pork for the spirit of her grandfather.

'The dogs will eat it,' Ruby said to her father.

He ignored her. He moved on, climbing back up the hillside to the cemetery gates. The rest of the family trudged after him. Only Ruby's mother stayed behind, pasting long strips of red paper to the grave to show the proper ceremony had been performed.

She spared a glance at her daughter, in her tight jeans and western T-shirt and all that paint on her face. When she spoke her voice was not unkind. 'For now you like your new life, Ruby-ah, but you must not forget the past. When history dies, the future has no children.'

Ruby watched the others disappear among the crowds on

the mountainside. She knew she would not follow them. She scooped up a little pile of ash from the grave and threw it into the wind.

'Okay,' she said, 'then let it die.'

23

The snow-white Countach parked on the kerb was the only clue to the casual bypasser that there was anything of note above the Ng Mai Cheung, an unremarkable *chiu chao* restaurant off Granville Road in the heart of Kowloon. McReadie saw it and knew the man he was looking for was inside. He was recognised immediately he walked in. A waiter hurried over and ushered him through a curtained doorway and up a narrow flight of stairs.

He opened the door and the din of the half-dozen games that were in progress sounded like fireworks.

The mah-jongg parlour was reserved for the private use of friends and associates of The Ox, thousands of dollars passing across the tables for each game. The room was spartanly furnished, but the tables and chairs were antique rosewood, the mah-jongg tiles hand carved from ivory. The players were mainly Sun Yee On middle and upper management, in designer suits and western haircuts. They had glasses of cognac at their elbows, white-jacketed waiters hovering by the walls to refill their glasses.

Despite the air conditioning, the air was acrid with cigarette smoke.

The Ox looked up from his game, and rose to his feet without a word to the other players. He led McReadie to the ante-room at the back of the parlour. He told one of his staff to fetch a bottle of Courvoisier and sat down. He waved McReadie to the other chair.

The office was purely functional. The desk was a rickety wooden affair, a calendar with a photograph of Anita Mui tacked to the wall above it. There was a metal safe on the floor, and beside it an altar to Kuan Yin, two sticks of incense burning in a little brass urn full of grey ash.

'Well?' he said.

'Two hundred kilos,' McReadie said. 'That's a lot to lose.'

The Ox's face betrayed nothing.

A waiter hurried in with a bottle of Courvoisier. He set two brandy balloons on the desk and poured two fingers in each and shuffled out, closing the door.

'What sort of outlay did you have invested there? One and a half, two million Hong Kong dollars?'

The Ox swirled the brandy in his glass and swallowed it. The peasant eyes were like flint. If this *king chat* had something to say, let him say it. He was not going to incriminate himself.

'What did you think? That the marine police stumbled on the trawler by accident?'

'Don't understand.'

McReadie switched to Cantonese. 'There is a ghost in your Company, you eater of turtle shit.'

'Who?'

'Who knew about the shipment?'

The Ox still said nothing. Instead he reached into a drawer of the desk and took out a brown manila envelope. It was an inch thick. He slid it across the desk.

McReadie put out a hand and The Ox clamped his fingers around his wrist. 'You are sure?'

'The whisper came from Eddie Lau.' He pulled his hand free, picked up the envelope and slipped it inside his jacket pocket. He drained his glass and left.

McReadie and Keelan were in the 699 bar on the twentieth floor of the Arsenal Street headquarters. The big Scot was explaining to the American how the Chinese syndicates operated in Hong Kong. 'The triads are a cultural phenomenon,' McReadie was saying. 'When some ribboned bigwig from the Commissioner's office says there aren't any triads operating in Hong Kong, he's technically correct. Originally the triads were political organisations, but these days they're purely criminal enterprises. The IRA for example. If we pull out of Ireland, do you think they'll pack up their toys and go home? They've had twenty-five years experience of drug-running,

extortion and arms smuggling. They're not going to throw it away. If the political imperative disappears, they'll keep going for their own fun and profit. That's what the triads did.

'These days most of them have discarded the old traditions, they don't have the strict hierarchy that used to exist. Once an initiation ceremony could take up to three days. Now some kid just swears a blood oath to his sponsor and hands over his initiation fee. Simple as that. We pick some tattooed four-nine boy up off the street, he's not interested in any of the history, he just wants enough money to pay for his designer clothes and a fast car. No, what you have now is a number of criminal gangs who have patterned themselves after the triads. It's organised along ethnic and linguistic lines. If you're from Canton human nature says you'll stick with your own people, such as the 14K. If you're a *chiu chao* from Swatow you're likely to gravitate to the Sun Yee On. You can draw a similarity between British football supporters, if you like.

'Say you and I want to do a heroin deal. If we can make money it won't matter to me that you're from the Wo Sing Wo and I'm 14K. All I care about is the money. And I don't need a big boss to tell me what to do. I run my own business. Apart from perhaps the Sun Yee On, most triad gangs don't have a central leadership.'

'So where do you draw the line between triads and ordinary criminals?' Keelan asked him.

'Hard to say. It's just not black and white. If you're a criminal, being a member of triad is like being a mason. It oils the wheels. Besides, it's not a peripheral activity. For example, one of my neighbours is a very prominent Chinese businessman whose daughter's boutique in Kowloon was being stood over by a bunch of young thugs. He didn't contact me about it, didn't ring the police. He called the head of the Sun Yee On to fix the problem. To tell you the truth he probably would have done a better job for him. The Sun Yee On is unencumbered by legal process. But I guess that's the drawback of living in a democracy.'

'So are the triads back in the States linked to your triads here in Hong Kong?'

'All the headquarters lodges are here. But the leadership is mainly passive, arbitrating over internal disputes and problems with other triads. How much money is actually sent back here from overseas – that's hard to say.'

'So if I'm a Hong Kong triad and I emigrate to San Francisco, how do I set up my own triad?'

'If you wanted to deal drugs, say, you don't *have* to do anything. But you will. Because that's the way things are done. First you ask your 489 here in Hong Kong for permission to start your own chapter, you might even get your own little black flag. And when you get there you go to work. You might send dues every now and then to Hong Kong, some of them do, but the 489 in Hong Kong has no control over you. *You're* a 489 now. But of course, if you step on someone's patch in your new home town, no one's going to come from Hong Kong to help you. Unless there's something in it for them, perhaps.'

'So how do they organise their drug trade?'

'We think it's organised at top level summits. Same as the mafia. The big guys from the Sun Yee On and the Wah Ching and the 14K all get together in a big hotel here or in the States and they make the necessary arrangements. The Hong Kong end guarantees the product and the transportation, the boys at the American end do the wholesaling. Twenty kilos to the Italians, twenty kilos to the Spanish gangs, that sort of thing. Very little goes into Chinatown, as you know. That's the irony of it. It's like the old Chinese opium running of last century, only now it's the Chinese flooding the West. Trying to stop it is like trying to cram an octopus into a string bag.

'The great thing about narcotics, if you're a triad, is it's a game everyone can play. Even the youth gangs can dabble in it. You go off to Bangkok, buy a couple pounds of number four, hide it in your suitcase. If you get through customs you have dope worth a million dollars on the streets of any American city.'

'A lot of this is still new to me, Dave. Back home, I dealt mainly with the Italians.'

'It's a learning curve. The point is, you and I have to concentrate on finding narcotics. That's our job. But drugs

are only part of the story. You can make as much money smuggling illegals now as you can smuggling drugs. You can get two hundred thousand Hong Kong dollars for each illegal you ship to New York, and the smuggling routes are often the same. And you move hundreds in a shipment. Get them out of China, forge their passports and immigration documents – and the triads are very good at forgery, just look at the Rolex copy watches you can buy in Kowloon, and the fifty-dollar Gucci handbags – and then put them on a plane to the States or Australia or Europe. If you're caught, you only get three years for smuggling illegals. You get twenty years for heroin.

'And now they're moving in to white-collar crime. The new technology makes it easy for them. Counterfeit credit cards, stock market fraud, insurance rip-offs. Plus their bread and butter; extortion, prostitution, gambling, protection. And they all have legitimate front businesses, like restaurants, nightclubs and bars. I know one triad bookmaker who sits on the beach at Macao and takes bets on Happy Valley and Shatin races on his cellular phone, outside our jurisdiction. Whoever said crime doesn't pay was a fucking idiot.'

'So the two hundred keys of number four your boys intercepted is not going to put the price of number four through the roof on the streets of New York.'

McReadie smiled with Keelan. 'It's a great public relations victory, and it will look good on my record. And it will have spoiled someone's day. But that's about it. Here, have another drink.'

They were still there half an hour later when Lacey arrived. She felt a stab of irritation. Well. They looked like two old boys at the school clubhouse.

McReadie waved her over. Keelan smiled at her, a little sheepishly, she thought.

She threw her leather bag on the bar. 'More male bonding?' she said.

Keelan ignored that. 'Can I get you a drink?' he said.

'Just soda water, please.'

'You don't want a proper drink?'

'Imagine you were in my position, Lieutenant Keelan. Would you want a reputation as a barfly?'

McReadie grinned. 'She thinks being the only ex-pat woman detective in the Wanchai Serious Crimes Squad makes her an endangered species.' He shrugged. 'She could be right.'

Keelan gave her a tight smile. 'All this and sexual harassment too?'

'Something like that.' She looked at her watch. 'Besides, it's two minutes to twelve. That's a little early for me.'

'We're having a little celebration,' Keelan said.

'You've given up smoking?'

'Monday night Mac and his boys picked up two hundred kilos of number four on a trawler off Aberdeen.'

'I heard. Congratulations.'

'Just a wee miracle I engineered. Actually John here came up to talk about your Hennessey Road chopping. Offered to buy me lunch.'

'So here you are started on the appetisers. Or is it main course?'

McReadie threw back his Scotch and passed his glass across the counter for another. 'Well, the Americans are buying.'

Keelan had on a sports shirt under his jacket, and grey trousers. Looks as if he put them on with a shovel, Lacey thought. It was obvious he did not possess either an amah or an iron. He had shaved, but not well. His attention wandered to the window and the harbourfront of Wanchai, then he turned back as if suddenly remembering where he was. Too young for Alzheimer's, she decided. But there was something about this vague and shambling bear of a man that piqued her curiosity. He seemed to focus in and out of his surroundings like a badly tuned radio. An unusual demeanour for a policeman, she thought. Even for an American.

The waiter brought two more Scotches. Keelan treated his warily.

'Your usual drink?' Lacey asked him. She was aware of a burgeoning curiosity about him.

'Not really. How could you tell? I prefer Wild Turkey.'

'Does that taste as good as it sounds?'

He grinned and this time the full force of his attention was focused on her. She was surprised to find herself flattered. 'I like you better this time,' he said.

'You made quite a first impression on me too.'

'I guess I said some bad things about you. Then Mac here told me you were his niece. He beat me up and told me to be more polite in future.'

'I hadn't noticed.' That was rough, Lacey thought. Why do I get the feeling he's baiting me?

There was a pause, then McReadie grinned at Keelan. 'Don't take her personally. She's harmless. Aren't you, Lace?'

Lacey sipped her soda water and smiled, fought back the temptation to kick her uncle in the groin.

'What's the score on Eddie Lau?' Keelan said.

'Love forty. He walked in here one afternoon with his silk who immediately began to harangue us about a possible defamation suit. Shortly afterwards some other gentleman confessed to the assault and Mister Lau was released. Do you still want to talk to him?'

'Do you think that would do any good?'

'Not really.'

'Mac's boys are putting him under surveillance. See where he leads us. What about this Mister Li?'

'Mister Li is being kept sedated. One hundred and twenty-three stitches. He also lost his left arm. It's a shame, it had a rather nice tattoo on it. You searched his boat and his apartment?'

'Nothing,' McReadie said.

Keelan stared into his Scotch, decided against drinking any, and put it back on the bar. 'What's this Eddie Lau like?'

'Most people can't speak highly enough of him. Last year he donated quite a large sum of money to a children's hospital. People say he can be quite charming. He made a passable attempt at it during our interview but personally I found it nauseating.'

'As far as the taxation department is concerned,' McReadie interrupted, 'he owns five restaurants, three in Kowloon and two in Shatin. He also has an interest in a textiles factory in

Mongkok. Unofficially we believe he holds the rank of Red Pole in the 14K triad. A Red Pole is like . . . a hit man, I suppose.'

'Drugs?'

'No thanks, I'll stick to Scotch,' McReadie said, and pushed his empty glass across the counter.

Keelan looked at Lacey. 'No, I have paperwork,' she said. 'To answer your question, Eddie Lau was last arrested in 1984 for an aggravated assault in Shatin. Since then we have nothing on him. Not drugs, or extortion, or computer and video piracy. But we know he's made a lot of money from all of them.' She hitched her bag on her shoulder. 'Good luck, Lieutenant.' She handed him her card. 'If you should need any more help, don't hesitate to give me a call.'

He took the card and put it absently in his pocket. His attention had wandered again, she could tell he was already thinking of something else. McReadie was telling him about a heroin factory they had found two years ago in Shatin they believed Eddie Lau had financed, but she could tell Keelan was not listening.

A strange man. Strange, and intriguing.

She left the mess and walked back to the lift.

24

From Central, a number of narrow lanes rise towards the Mid-levels, many of them bearing the names of colonial functionaries from another era; Caine, Staunton, Elgin, Lyndhurst, Graham. The best-known name among the casual tourists is probably Ladder Street.

It had been chiselled out of the rock in the last century, two hundred feet of rough-hewn stone steps writhing down the side of the Peak, so that sweating sedan bearers could heft rich Chinese compradores and British administrators and taipans to their homes on Caine Road. Now the sweat was on the faces of the American and European tourists who puffed up the steep incline to look for the exotic in the Man Mo temple and the antique shops clustered around its junction with Hollywood Road. Like all of history's legends it had become a tourist trap, many of the antique chests and snuff bottles made a few weeks before in sweat shops in Kowloon or the Territories, the rattan blackwood tables cheaper in San Francisco and London and Sydney.

Vincent Tse sat in the fusty gloom of his antique shop, behind the Buddha-statues and rosewood chests and carved screens, calculating the month's profits on an abacus, entering the results on a computer keyboard. The glow of the screen was the only source of light in the back of the shop.

Vincent found it hard to concentrate this morning on the hand-written figures in the ledger in front of him. Ruby Wen! Somehow she had manipulated them into a conflict with the Sun Yee On. Eddie listened to everything she said, believed every word. The only proof they had that The Ox had taken their powder was from the ghost she was supposed to have in the police headquarters. Gang wars were not good business. Eddie was a fighter, but he did not

understand business. Business was about profit, not choppers and fighting chains.

Ruby Wen!

Whenever he thought about her the pain was real, a sharp stab deep in his chest, below his heart. Eddie was enslaved by her. Vincent could not make him see reason.

And now they had betrayed The Ox's latest shipment to the police. It was madness.

He stared at the figures in the ledger in front of him. They were supposed to be the March accounts for the antique shop. In fact, when divided exactly by a factor of one thousand, they were the monthly transactions of illegal earnings for Eddie Lau's syndicate.

Business was good. Now, because of Ruby Wen, they were putting it all at risk.

There was a commotion in the front of the shop and Vincent peered through the doorway to see what the problem was. There were three young Chinese in the shop, young triad toughs. They all wore designer jeans and wrap-around sunglasses, one of them had a black Lacoste sports shirt revealing a serpent tattoo slithering down his left arm, a blood-red poppy flower on the back of his right hand. Over the protests of Vincent's young female sales assistant, Edith, the youth picked up a snuff bottle – ceramic, and a genuine antique, nineteenth century – and deliberately dropped it on the floor.

Vincent knew. In that moment, he knew.

There was no back way out of the shop. So he ran for the door.

One of the youths saw him, and casually pushed him as he tried to rush past, knocking him into a stack of Korean chests. Vincent lost his balance and fell. Edith screamed.

The three triads crowded around and started to kick him. They were all wearing sneakers, to aid their *gong-fu* style of fighting, but their kicks were expertly placed. He writhed under the blows, all aimed at his chest. He heard an elastic snap as one of his ribs broke.

More shrill screams, he did not know if they were his

own or Edith's. He rose to his hands and knees and crawled towards the door. They made no attempt to stop him, but the kicking continued, and four times he crashed to his face on the floor.

Faces swam in and out of his vision, he recognised the proprietor of a neighbouring antique store, two grey-haired Western tourists in Jetabout caps.

Vincent struggled to his feet, still doubled over from the terrible pain of his ribs, hardly able to breathe. He heard the youths laughing. Then one of them kicked him in the face.

He fell.

It was just a game to them, he realised. They wanted to practise the skills they had learned in the gymnasium.

He tried again to stand, tumbled forward down the front steps of his shop. He felt his head strike the hard stone of the pavement, and for a moment he blacked out. He did not remember much after that, but others did; one couple, on a three-night stopover from Sydney, Australia, described to the police in detail how, blinded by his own blood, he had crawled back towards the three youths, who were standing in the doorway, laughing.

Then they kicked him unconscious.

McReadie leaned on the bar in the 699 Club and ordered another Scotch. He poured a little of the dry ginger into his glass and took a long swallow. He knew that by now he should be on the minibus out to his apartment in Stanley. But more and more his real home was here, listening to the familiar shop-talk of the other detectives. Here, at least, he was never lonely, was among his own. As the 1997 deadline approached, he found already á growing sense of nostalgia, a feeling of loss, a growing resentment. There would be no place here for him in the new Hong Kong, yet this was his home. He had been in the colony for twenty-six years. England was alien to him now, and yet where else was there to go? He felt like a refugee.

Here too he could brood about the new high-tech, low-moral world that he did not understand, or want to, and

could always find a sympathetic ear. The dull ache in his gut would submit for a while to the anaesthetic of booze and brotherhood.

Someone sat down on the stool on his left. He looked up hopefully, and then saw that it was Lacey.

'Lace,' he said, and signalled to Tony, the barman, to bring her a beer.

'Busy?' he said.

Lacey nodded. 'You heard?'

McReadie shook his head. 'Been out all afternoon, shaking down sampans in Aberdeen harbour.'

'Three young men walked into an antique shop in Ladder Street this afternoon and beat the owner unconscious.'

'Are we talking about Vincent Tse?'

'We are.'

'Do they know who did it?'

'None of the Chinese saw anything, of course. But there were two Australian tourists who saw the whole thing. They say one of the boys had the tattoo of a snake on his left arm and a crimson flower on the back of his right hand.'

'Faces?'

Lacey shook her head.

McReadie grinned. 'They didn't say the magic words, did they?'

'*The Chinese all look alike to us*. The exact words. Still, they have the tattoo lead. That's something.'

'Any guesses?'

'I'm sure the people responsible will soon show up.'

'Yes, but I've always found it a wee bit hard to interview suspects in the morgue.'

'That's why I hope we find them before the Wo Sing Wo.' Lacey put down her beer and picked up her bag. 'Thanks for the drink.'

'Why?'

'What?'

'Why do you hope we find them first?'

'Because that's our job. We're the law. Not the triads.'

McReadie shrugged. 'Perhaps their way's better. No running off to some fancy defence counsel. You know the difference between a lawyer and a whore? A whore stops screwing her customers after they're dead.'

'You've had too much to drink.'

'The triad way – if they did it, they pay. Whack. No dirtbag defence lawyer to wheedle them out of it.'

'Dirtbag?' Lacey said, her face twisted between a smile and a frown. 'Where did you get that expression?'

'Keelan.'

'Keelan,' she said, deadpan. 'Does Keelan agree with you about letting guns rule the street?'

'It's a private view, Lace.'

'I hope so. I wouldn't like it to become a trend.' She looked at her watch. 'Better go, or I'll be late for Charlotte.' She turned to go.

'Did you know about Vincent's supposed relationship with Eddie?'

Lacey looked puzzled. 'I've seen the files.' When she could not decipher the expression on McReadie's face, she added: 'Both Wo office bearers. Vincent's also a close business associate.'

'Very close.'

'Can you explain that?'

'The rumour is, on the street, that Eddie has Vincent's teethmarks on his pillow.'

'They're lovers?'

'You think Conservative backbenchers are the only ones with kinks in the pin?'

'That puts a different slant on it.'

McReadie grinned. 'I wouldn't let anyone hear you using that kind of language after 1997.' He finished his Scotch and signalled Tony for another. 'Just thought you ought to know. Eddie Lau's private affairs seem to be your bailiwick these days.'

'Not any more.' She looked at the whisky. 'Can I give you a lift home?'

'What for?' he said and pulled up a stool. He was set for the night.

Queen Mary Hospital, Pokfulam

Eddie sat beside the bed, his eyes never leaving Vincent's face. His jaw was broken in three places, and the surgeons had wired it back into place. His nose and the zygomatic process around his left eye had been fractured when he fell on the stone steps and the eye itself was pulpy and swollen shut. There were gaps in his mouth where he had lost teeth. His head was swollen, like a soft and over-ripe fruit. The doctors feared a cerebral oedema, and there was a chance that he would need further surgery. If the brain continued to bruise, they would have to temporarily remove the top of his skull to allow the swelling to develop, one of the doctors had explained, otherwise it might push down into the spinal column and kill him.

They had strapped his ribs, and given him morphine for the pain, but the effects of the analgesia were starting to wear off and there were still two hours until his next medication was allowed.

Eddie did not move, or speak. He was not even sure if Vincent knew he was there.

Eddie knew that it was not just the physical pain that was the key to Vincent's suffering. They had taken away his face, his respect. They had beaten him in public, and soon everyone in Hong Kong would know that Eddie Lau's White Fan had cried out like a girl. And at the hands of some raw blue lanterns, fresh out of school. What they had done was much worse than if they had killed him.

A woman entered the room. He did not look up, thinking it was one of the nurses. He did not recognise the voice straight away.

'How is he?'

Eddie did not reply.

'Your friends and associates have met with a great deal of misfortune in the past weeks, Mister Lau. Have you thought perhaps of lighting incense to Kuan Yin for protection?'

He looked up. It was the detective he had met that day in the Wanchai police station, the one who had issued the arrest

warrant. He could not remember her name. 'What do you want?' he said.

'I want to find the people who did this.'

'It is none of your business.'

'I'm a detective in the Serious Crimes Squad. This is a serious crime.'

'This didn't happen in Wanchai.'

'Even detectives talk to each other.'

'You think putting the sons of lepers who did this into a prison for a year or two will pay for this? How long have you lived in Hong Kong, detective?'

'All my life.'

'And you still don't understand the Chinese?'

'I understand the law.'

'Your law, not mine.'

'If you go after the men who did this, we will come looking for you.'

'I piss on all your ancestors. Get out of here.'

Lacey left.

Eddie continued his bedside vigil.

He felt broken inside. He knew what he was, which was why he admired Vincent so much. When they were together he felt like a clumsy warrior with a piece of precious porcelain, holding it wondrously in his fist, trying to understand it, fearful of dropping and breaking it. Vincent was the artist, the thinker, the planner. The intellect. Vincent was what he would never be. Eddie was his protector.

And it was his fault they had hurt Vincent. He had acted recklessly in his arrogance. Now see what he had done. He should have known they would hurt him. He should have foreseen that this was the way The Ox would take revenge.

He had failed; but those responsible would pay for making him experience his own failure. They would pay for violating that which he held inviolate.

25

They found the bodies in the basement of an abandoned tenement in Johnston Road. It had been built just before the war, an ancient monument by Hong Kong standards and was now due for demolition and redevelopment. Now it was cordoned off with blue police tape, and there were police constables on duty at the gate to deter the curious. Lacey showed one of the men her ID and slipped underneath the tape.

The foyer was tainted with years of decay, the accumulated aromas of boiled cabbage and must and urine and sweat. A heavy fire door on the other side of the ancient elevator had been propped open. It led down to the basement.

Lacey had seen many crime scenes, and her senses had been hardened by much violent death and mutilation. More than her father had ever wished his innocent little daughter to see. But this was truly shocking, a nightmare vision. There were three bodies, and much of the blood they had once contained was now smeared on the floors and the walls. They had not died well.

Tyler was standing at the foot of the basement steps with two of the detective sergeants from her squad, Brian Kwok and David Poon. They were waiting for the government chemist and a senior staff officer from the Identity Bureau to do their work. A police photographer was taking shots of the scene, under Tyler's direction. Two halogen lamps had been set up on tripods in the corners of the room. It looked like the set of a particularly bloody movie, with Tyler the director.

He saw her and raised his eyebrows in greeting. He was holding a silver foil container, eating a chicken and rice dish with a fork. 'Don't you hate it when you get these calls during lunch?' he said.

'What happened?'

'This is not nice,' he said.

'I can see that, sir.'

Lacey took a closer look at the three bodies. The men were naked, their hands tied behind their backs. From a cursory inspection it was apparent to Lacey that they had been tortured before they were murdered, probably with sharp instruments.

'Whoever did this is not a pleasant human being,' Tyler said. He spooned in some chicken and rice. 'I can spare you the details if you like. It will all be in the report.'

'I may not have your constitution, sir, but I am still a detective. I promise I won't faint.'

'Well,' Tyler said, 'if you notice, there's some conduit and a length of barbed wire in the corner. According to the coroner's preliminary findings, it would appear that one of these gentlemen had the conduit inserted into him, followed by the barbed wire. It was then removed, with prejudice, in the same order as it was first introduced. As I said, whoever did this was not the sort of person you or I would have for dinner.'

'Dear God.'

'The others were similarly abused, but without the same degree of invention. They had various body parts removed before they were despatched, apparently with the ubiquitous meat cleaver.'

'Who are they?'

Tyler pointed out one of the bodies. What Lacey had taken for another bloody wound now resolved into the shape of a crimson opium flower. Lacey went closer, examined the body's left arm. A snake.

'He's one of the three men who attacked Vincent Tse.'

'Not yet proved, but the supposition is not stretching the laws of probability too far.'

'Eddie Lau's handiwork.'

Tyler finished his chicken and rice. 'Or one of his pleasant friends. They say The Onion is supposed to enjoy this sort of thing. Almost enough to put you off your lunch, isn't it?'

'But not quite.'

'A man has to eat.'

'I need some fresh air.'

Lacey went back upstairs to the foyer. Graffiti was plastered across the bare concrete walls, the tags of street toughs who would leave no other mark on the world than the stylised symbols they put on walls with spray cans. There were piles of rubbish rotting in the corners.

Brian Kwok joined her.

'When were they murdered?'

'The coroner says that rigor mortis is not complete and no maggot infestation so estimate between four to twelve hours. Puts time of death between one o'clock last night and nine o'clock this morning.'

'Start a canvass of the block, see if anyone saw or heard anything.'

'Do we bring in Eddie Lau?'

'And have his silk charge us with harassment?' She shook her head, pondered for a moment. 'We'll search his apartment though. He expects us to, but we'll do it anyway. The Onion as well. Tell David Poon we have to comb the basement, the stairs, both exits for prints, hair, whatever. We need some actual physical evidence to tie someone to this . . .'

Tyler appeared from the fire stairs. He tossed his empty foil tray alongside the other plastic rubbish in the corner under the stairwell. 'Forensics will probably find that, dust the prints and haul me in for questioning.'

'There's going to be a reaction to this. If these are Sun Yee On boys, we could be looking at the start of a triad war.'

'While they're killing each other there's less for us to worry about.'

'But that's not the point is it?'

'I don't know. Isn't it?'

'If we don't keep law and order, what's the point of us being here?'

'To protect the innocent,' Tyler said, and this time he wasn't smiling. 'Come on, I'll see you back at the office. There's this great little cake shop in Amoy Street. I'll pick us up a couple of lotus seed buns.'

'Keelan.'

'Lieutenant. This is Detective Inspector Lacey.'

Keelan felt his mood change. He relaxed, and put his feet up on the desk. He reached for his cigarettes, remembered the trouble it had got him into the first time, and tossed them back in the drawer. Crazy, but he sensed she was the kind of lady who could detect tobacco smoke even at the end of an optic fibre.

'What can I do for you?'

'I wanted to talk to you about Eddie Lau.'

Keelan drew out the pause. 'Eddie Lau. Sorry, can you give me the Chinese Commercial Code on that?'

'What?'

'After all, detective, you do realise there's only four hundred and seventy-two surnames for the entire Chinese population.'

There was a beat and then he heard her laughing. 'Okay, I deserved that.'

He liked hearing a woman laugh again. It had been a long time. 'What do you want to know about Eddie Lau?'

'I tried calling Mac but he's out. So I thought you might be able to help me. I wanted to know if Narcotics still had him under surveillance.'

'I believe it was called off.'

'Damn. Why?'

'Usual story, lack of manpower. A lot of information to follow up, not enough eyes and ears to deal with it all. Why, what's the problem?'

'I was hoping you might help us establish his movements last night.'

'By the way you're talking, he wasn't home watching videos.'

There was another pause on the end of the line. Keelan watched a green and white Cathay 747 grope for the runway at Kai Tak between the towering white boxes of Kowloon.

'What are you doing this afternoon?' she said.

Keelan tried not to betray his surprise at the unexpected

invitation. 'Saving the free world from the menace of narcotics dealers.'

'Perhaps I can help you with your education. I'll pick you up in half an hour.'

'Okay,' Keelan said, and replaced the phone on its cradle. Well I'll be damned.

26

Causeway Bay had been described as Hong Kong's glimpse of its own Bladerunner future; wall-to-wall crowds living vertically in white, bright-lit boxes sprawled around Victoria Park and out to the oppressive cluster of North Point.

The elevator was broken so Lacey and Keelan walked the eleven floors to the apartment. *Lap-sap* – rubbish – had accrued in the dark and mouldering corners of a stairwell that had apparently been recently used as a lavatory by several of the building's occupants. It was the middle of the afternoon but without the bare electric bulbs that lit each landing they would have been unable to find their way in the gloom.

There was a smell of cabbage and ginger and garlic. Most of the apartments had no kitchen so food was often cooked in the corridor. They stopped outside a green-painted door. Lacey took a deep breath. She took out her badge and knocked.

The door opened. A squat and smooth-skinned Cantonese in a white vest and ill-fitting grey trousers stood in front of them. Almost at once his face settled itself to a mask of dismay.

'Chang Mai-cheung?'

The man nodded, looking dazed.

Lacey held out her shield and was surprised to find her voice tight. 'Detective Inspector Madeleine Lacey, Wanchai CID.' She indicated Keelan. 'This is Lieutenant John Keelan. He's a colleague of mine.'

The man just stood there, blinking like an owl.

'May we come in?'

Keelan felt himself tense. Chang started to shout something, his voice tremulous with fear. There were more shouts from inside as his wife rushed to the door.

Lacey heard doors click open along the corridor, felt eyes peering out at her. She did not want to play this out in full view of the man's neighbours. She edged her way through the door into the apartment.

'The police!' the man shouted in Cantonese, 'The police are here! Something's happened to Pui-kee!'

Mrs Chang appeared in the passageway, a small woman, black hair permed, wearing a faded purple terry-towelling tracksuit. Her face was dark with dread.

Keelan followed Lacey through the door and shut it.

'Pui-kee?' the woman said to Lacey.

'I'm afraid so,' she said.

Children's faces crowded into the doorway behind Mrs Chang, the youngest perhaps four or five, the oldest a teenager. Lacey had seen plenty of apartments like this, two bedrooms, three at the most, with five or six children as well as grandparents. It was the natural breeding ground of the triads.

'He is hurt?'

Lacey had her speech rehearsed. Time enough later for them to learn the true circumstances of her son's death. 'We think he was abducted, with two others. We were called to an abandoned tenement block at lunchtime today.'

'He's dead?' Chang shouted.

'I'm afraid so . . .'

He slumped against the wall, his mouth gaping open in shock. Mrs Chang fell, as if struck on the back of the head, but one of her daughters sprang from the doorway and caught her before she hit the floor. Two of the older boys dragged her towards the bedroom, her husband stumbling after her.

Keelan looked at Lacey. He had not understood the interchange in Cantonese, but the situation was clear enough. Lacey indicated to him that they should go in.

The apartment was cramped, a single window overlooking another apartment block just like the one they occupied. A panorama of laundry poles. A baby, no more than eighteen months played on the balcony among the clutter of withered potted plants. Two finches in tiny bamboo cages chirruped plaintively above the child's head.

The flat was messy with the detritus of a large family, homework spread on a Formica table, toys on the floor, shelves littered with an array of beauty products and cleaning aids, the junk of a thousand television commercials. An old woman sat in a chair watching a Chinese soap opera on the colour television. They might not have a private kitchen or bathroom, but every family maintained that most basic of life's essentials, a television set.

'Hello, grandmother,' Lacey said respectfully, in Cantonese to the old woman.

The old lady stared back at them and said nothing. Keelan could hear Mrs Chang screaming in the bedroom.

The Kitchen God smiled absently from his shrine in the corner of the room. There was incense, a mandarin, a bar of chocolate and a packet of Dunhill cigarettes gathered around his image. Obviously not enough, Keelan thought, sourly. The fat old fellow had let this particular family down very badly this year.

'Thanks for bringing me,' Keelan said.

'You wanted to understand more about the triads.'

'This is it?'

'This is part of it.'

Lacey found herself staring at an array of photographs in cheap frames. She absently picked one up.

Chang groped his way back into the room like a blind man, feeling his way among the furniture, as if he no longer trusted his own eyes. 'Is it possible there is some mistake?' he said.

Lacey looked down at the photograph in her hand. She realised with shock that it was Pui-kee. He was wearing his school uniform, blue shorts, white shirt with tie. He was grinning shyly at the camera surrounded by his brothers and sisters. She tried to reconcile this image with the tattooed corpse she had witnessed two hours ago in the basement in Johnston Road.

Lacey placed her finger on Pui-kee in the photograph. Chang knew she had just answered his question. The little strength he had just gathered around himself threatened to dissolve.

Lacey cleared his throat. 'Mr Chang, I know this is a bad time for you, but we need you to come with us to make a positive identification. Please.'

She was not sure Chang had heard her. The faces of the boy's brothers and sister appeared in the doorway. To Lacey their expressions seemed almost accusing. As if she were responsible.

'What's happening?' Keelan asked her.

'He asked me if there might be some mistake.'

Keelan took a deep breath. 'I hate this. I've always hated this part of the job.'

Lacey shrugged her shoulders.

'I think he's going to faint.'

Instead Chang shook himself, as if he was waking from a trance. He stumbled towards the door. Lacey hurried after him. She wanted only to get out of there. As they shut the door she heard Mrs Chang wailing again.

She hoped that whoever had the job of explaining to them how their son had died would do it gently.

Lacey pulled over outside the Hopewell Centre. It was late afternoon and the concrete towers of Wanchai left the sidestreet in permanent shadow.

'So. Why did you bring me, detective?' Keelan said to her.

'I told you. I thought it would be good for your education.'

'Yeah?'

'You're dealing with another culture here, Lieutenant. It can be confusing. I've known some of your people go back to the States thinking every Chinese is a triad. But for the most part they are a very hard-working and law-abiding people. Most of the kids that are involved in crime are just kids. The triads use the youth gangs to do their dirty work for them. The ones who do the damage are just doing what they're told, but they're not the planners, not the brains behind it. As you saw for yourself this afternoon, there's good motivation to try and better yourself. They don't have to come from bad families. For most of these kids the triads

represent a fast track to easy money. They've got nothing to lose.'

'And they're willing to risk it all.'

'Exactly.'

'It's the same story back home.'

'But in the States they're your people. You at least understand the problems. But when the Chinese come to America – and they will come, they are coming in their tens of thousands, legally and illegally, now that the countdown is on – you won't understand, not at all. There's so many contradictions. Although they are mostly law abiding, they don't like the police. They love their families but they're obsessed with money and profit.'

'We've had the Chinese in California for over a century.'

'In their Chinatowns. But it takes a long while to assimilate a minority. Fifty years, two or three generations, for the Italians. That's why you've only just started to weaken the Mafia. And the Chinese are far more clannish than the Italians.'

'I understand what you're saying.'

'I hope so. Because when people talk to you about the triads, it's easy to think of them in two dimensions. But most of them are like Pui-kee, kids from overcrowded apartment blocks with no hope of anything. His parents probably had no idea the kind of trouble he was getting into. Perhaps it started when he began hanging out with some other kids at an amusement parlour, or a martial arts gym. Perhaps there was some older kid who was in the triad, and was tough, that he looked up to. Perhaps this other kid invited him to become his "follower". So, okay. This is what he wants, some place to belong. Like kids in England will follow a soccer team, just to be one of the boys. So he starts off by "hanging the blue lantern", which is a kind of apprenticeship. The older kid tells him someone needs roughing up, or else he wants him and his friends to shake down a certain restaurant. Well, it's not so hard. He goes into the place, eats a meal with his friends, and then refuses to pay. And instead of the owner threatening him, *he* threatens *the owner*. Or else he stands in the doorway, looking tough, glaring at all the customers.

And he thinks this is kind of fun. He hasn't got a job, or anything else to do. And when he sees his old friends, out at the soccer fields or a basketball game they all think he's tough. Later on, if he really is tough, and not just play-acting, he may be invited to join the triad as a 49 boy, and in time he may get *mah jais*, horses – followers – of his own. The really cold ones, the efficient criminals, are promoted up the ranks. Perhaps one day they may run syndicates of their own. They set up their own enterprises, have other people do some of the dirty work. For the rest, by the time they're in their thirties and forties, they don't want to fight any more. They've laundered their profits from extortion and drugs or gambling or whatever, into respectable businesses. They may stop being active in the triad. But they still have their connections. And when business gets dirty, they can still look to the street.'

Keelan nodded. 'So how are we going to stop them?'

Lacey shrugged. 'You could start by learning Cantonese, recruiting Chinese police. Unless you start to infiltrate the organisations, you don't have a prayer.'

'You think America is the next target?'

'You're not a target, you're a done deal. Ask the Wah Ching.' Keelan was familiar with the Wah Ching, the dominant Chinese triad in San Francisco. 'While they can still make ten per cent on the Hang Seng the big names will stay here in Hong Kong. But they'll also have a bolt hole sorted out in Australia or Britain or the Golden Mountain.'

'The Golden Mountain?'

'It's what the Cantonese call California.'

'Well. Thanks for all that. That was really depressing.'

She grinned. 'All part of the service.'

He started to get out of the car and stopped. 'Look, detective . . .'

'You can call me Lace. Everyone else does.'

'Lace. I'm sorry. For smoking in your office. For thinking you were a secretary.' He insinuated a smile. 'For not knowing about the Chinese Commercial Code.'

'I over-reacted. Anyway, it doesn't matter.'

'It matters to me. Can we start again?'

'Sure,' Lacey said.

'Perhaps we can have a drink some time.'

Lacey felt herself tense. She fiddled with the rear vision mirror. 'I don't think so.'

He looked hurt. '. . . Why?'

'No one would say anything, Lieutenant. And I'm not suggesting you would tell anyone. But sooner or later people would find out. And in some undefinable way it would cheapen me. Do you understand? I'm a woman and no matter how I do my job or how you do yours there are some timeless rules that still apply. My working life and my private life cannot overlap.'

'Well. I suppose you're right.' And he found himself thinking, irrationally: Besides, what would Anna think?

'I suppose I am,' Lacey said.

Keelan started to say something else and changed his mind. Too much inside him that was impossible to explain. These days it was hard to know what he might think or feel or do next. He wondered if he was ever going to be free of this burden.

'Okay. Well. Thanks again. As they say in Ethiopia – Abyssinia.'

It was a weak joke but she smiled.

She watched him cross the street.

She had not meant to be so offhand. But she told herself she was a level-headed young woman and she flatly refused to get involved with married men. Single ones were problem enough.

As he rode the elevator to the fifty-seventh floor Keelan thought about Anna. Why, whenever he was with another woman, did he still feel as if he was cheating? They had told him that time would heal every pain. But that was over a year ago and now he wondered if it was true. The mind was like the body; there were some injuries that healed, perhaps left small scars that no one could see. There were other hurts that left you crippled for the rest of your life.

Perhaps that's what had happened to him.

27

San Francisco

A Mercedes stretch arrived outside the canopied entrance of Ruby's hotel in Campton Place at exactly three o'clock. A large dark-complexioned man in a Versace suit held the rear passenger door open for her and she climbed in.

She was driven across town to Pacific Heights, the enclave from which the city's lawyers and bankers and stockbrokers looked down on the life of the Bay. Ruby caught glimpses of fake Tudor and Georgian mansions, the facades concealed behind gardens of neatly tended shrubs. Her driver pulled on to Buchanan and touched a button below the sun shield. A pair of electrically operated gates swung open and they drove through.

A curving driveway led to a mansion of imposing Victorian design, the entrance shaded by a white portico, supported by columns of roccoco plaster. The stone facade was fretted with ornamental balconies, and gargoyles perched on the flat roof. For Ruby, the effect was spoiled by the appearance of the help. Instead of a white-liveried servant, the man who opened the door for her wore red braces over a white T-shirt, and a leather shoulder holster with a .44 Magnum.

John Bertolli was sitting at the end of a long polished mahogany table. Ruby counted a dozen chairs, upholstered in red plush, but only two were occupied. Bertolli himself was in his shirt-sleeves, braces hanging loose around his dark trousers and a napkin around his neck. He was eating chilli mussels with his fingers, dropping the shells into a large bowl. His two companions, also Italians, were not eating. He

dismissed them with a nod, and without introduction, and then rose to greet her.

'Ruby.' A voice like gravel. 'Good to see you again.' He wiped his fingers on the napkin and extended his hand. 'Sit down. Want a drink?'

'Maybe soda water.'

'Yuppie juice,' he said, and clicked his fingers at Magnum, who had escorted her into the room. He went off to do the boss's bidding.

Ruby looked around. The furniture and design was eclectic. A marble bust of a Caesar on a plinth in one corner, cut glass chandeliers overhead, an ebony lamp in the shape of a naked woman, an oil painting of a Bible scene in an elaborate gilt frame taking up almost an entire wall. An archway opened onto a large empty room with thick cream carpet. From around the corner Ruby heard the repetitive and infuriating muzak of a video game. Ruby craned her head and saw two small boys sitting on the floor in front of a huge television screen.

Bertolli returned his attention to the chilli mussels. 'Help yourself,' he said, indicating the bowl.

Ruby shook her head.

'Thought you people liked your seafood.'

Ruby watched the juice run down his thick fingers, broad knuckles interspersed with little tufts of black hair and thick chunks of gold. Ruby had been introduced to Gino Bertolli on her last trip to Golden Mountain. He was a large man, his hair thinning on his crown but there was plenty of it everywhere else. Ruby found him physically disgusting. She imagined it was men like this who first presented themselves at the Imperial Emperor's Court and earned westerners their reputation as monkeys and barbarians. Hair sprouted in tufts from under the collar of his shirt, his ears, even his nose. He looked like a coffee-shop proprietor from North Beach, except for the gold on his fingers, and the diamond-studded Rolex on his wrist.

She watched – and listened – while he finished his lunch. When he finished he wiped his fingers and mouth on his napkin and lit a cigarette. He studied her, his eyes candid.

She was wearing a flaming red cashmere melton jacket with a velvet collar and short skirt, matching leather gloves from Hermès and high black suede courts. Have to create a good impression every time. Eddie had always told her that.

'Got nice house,' Ruby said.

'Should be, it cost a fuckin' fortune. How long you in town?'

'Three days. Maybe four.'

His eyes speculated. Thinking of maybe dipping his stubby fingers into a little Hong Kong honey, she thought. She felt the familiar sick feeling in her stomach. Wait and see. Never know myself what this poor little farm girl will do to clinch a deal, heya.

Magnum reappeared with a glass and a bottle of cold Perrier water and placed it on the polished table in front of her. He withdrew without a word.

Bertolli reached for a glass of red wine. She expected him to swill it down, but he only sipped at it, savouring it for a moment before swallowing, like a connoisseur.

'So, you want to talk business?' he said.

'How much you want?'

He shrugged. 'Depends on the quality, depends on the price.'

'Top quality, ninety eight per cent, from Burma. One-forty.'

Bertolli lit a cigarette and blew the smoke towards the ceiling. A crucified Christ writhed on the wall. Ruby stared at it and shuddered. *Gwailos*. Laugh at us burning paper money in the street and their god is a naked man being tortured with sharpened nails.

'One-forty's too high,' Bertolli was saying. 'I can get one-thirty these days almost anywhere.'

Ruby did not answer. Almost anywhere was probably an exaggeration, but the price was slipping lower in the States. A lot of powder was now being trucked along the old silk route through Yunnan province and out through Canton and it was cheaper than smuggling through Thailand. Overheads for commissions to local government officials were not as high.

'How much you want?' Ruby asked him.

'Ten units.'

'Buy fifteen, maybe I can do one-twenty-five.' I can afford to be generous, Eddie paid for all the overheads except Henry Pi.

Bertolli thought about it. 'Fifteen units is a lot of horse.'

'One-twenty-five is a lot of discount.'

A small boy ran into the room. 'Papa! I did it! I beat Mohawk!'

Bertolli turned away, grabbed the boy around the shoulders and pulled him onto his lap. 'You did what? What did you do?'

'I beat Mohawk!' An older boy was standing in the doorway, his face sullen. His little brother pointed his finger at him from Bertolli's lap. 'I chopped you good!'

Bertolli grinned at Ruby. 'When I was a kid the TV meant *I Love Lucy*. Now they got all kinds of shit I don't understand.'

'Let's play basketball,' the older boy said.

'Only if I can be the Lakers.'

'Yeah, okay.'

The little boy clambered off Bertolli's lap and ran back into the other room. 'Kids,' Bertolli said.

Ruby heard the metallic voice of a basketball commentary, as the brothers started another game.

'Very good to have sons,' Ruby said.

'Little Aldo's just like his old man. Hates to get beat. Ever.' He drew on his cigarette. 'One-twenty.'

Ruby shrugged. 'One-third now, two-thirds when you get, okay?'

'When can you deliver, Ruby?'

'Can deliver any time.'

For the first time Bertolli looked surprised. 'This shit's already in town?'

'Maybe.'

'Maybe,' he echoed. 'Okay, Ruby. You got yourself a deal. Tomorrow call that number I gave you, I'll arrange for the first payment.' The number was a paging service, so calls could not be traced.

Ruby's face was blank, as if she did seven-figure deals all the

time. But she had to take a deep breath, her head spinning. Ten and half kilos at one-twenty was one and a quarter million dollars.

Now the only problem was Henry Pi.

Wanchai, Hong Kong

The fat man in the Brioni suit turned his Mercedes off Luard into Jaffe Road. The street was choked with Mazdas and Toyotas and when he could not find a parking space, he simply turned off the engine and left it there. No one was going to complain. Not to The Onion.

As he lumbered across the street to the restaurant, other Chinese hurried to get out of his way. The Onion was well known in Wanchai. He had once thrown a live snake into a restaurant that had refused to pay the protection Eddie Lau was demanding.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, ninety-five per cent humidity, the promise of rain. The Onion was already sweating when he reached the crimson and gold facade of the Water Dragon restaurant. Rows of shiny ducks hung from a long metal pole, crabs nudged for space in a bubbling aquarium. Like The Onion they too were unaware that they were shortly about to die.

A middle-aged German couple, out for a stroll from the nearby Wharney Hotel, were not intimidated by the fact that the restaurant did not have an English language menu posted on the windows, or by the all-Chinese clientele. They sat themselves down at a corner table, opened their guidebook, and pointed to the Chinese characters for chilli crab. They paid little attention to the four young men in sports jackets and jeans who lingered outside on the pavement. They did not see them enter the restaurant and go quickly up the stairs that The Onion had taken just half an hour before.

The room above the restaurant was a private mah-jongg parlour. It was a large room, dotted with tables and chairs, brightly lit, half a dozen bare light bulbs suspended on the

end of worn flex. The green paint was peeling off the walls, which were mostly bare except for a 1989 calendar featuring the photograph of a Chinese opera star, that no one had ever bothered to remove. A broken wooden fan revolved slowly on the ceiling.

There were less than a dozen men at the tables, engrossed in their games. The rapid-fire clack-clack of the tiles and the shouts of the players all but drowned the hubbub of conversation and the clatter of plates from the restaurant below.

An old man in a dirty white singlet sat on a hard-backed wooden chair by the door reading a newspaper. He saw the four young men and stood up quickly, taking a step backwards into the room. He knew at once what they had come for.

The intruders ignored him. The Onion had his back to them, engrossed in his game. But the man across the table from him saw them and immediately fell silent, his eyes giving the alarm.

The Onion looked around.

He knew then that he was going to die. But he reacted instantly, jumping to his feet, the chair clattering onto the wooden floor. He reached inside his jacket for his automatic pistol. But he did not even have time to cock the weapon. The first of the four men was already on him, a meat cleaver in his right fist. He chopped down and The Onion screamed in panic and pain.

The rest of the men joined their colleague and went to work. The steady thwack-thwack of the meat cleavers continued long after The Onion had stopped screaming. His fellow players crowded back along the wall and watched.

When it was over, one of the assassins warned them that they would meet a similar fate if they repeated what they had seen to the police.

It was an unnecessary warning.

As soon as the four men had left they all rushed for the stairs, leaving the owner to explain the demise of one of his best customers to the police.

Madeleine Lacey was still in her office, collating the activity reports from the triple slaying in Johnston Road. The call came

through from the despatcher as a homicide with a police officer down. She followed Brian Kwok, who was already running for the door, throwing on his jacket as he went.

The restaurant was just three hundred metres away. It was raining when they got there, and the blue motorcycle beacons were reflected in the black puddles. The road was packed solid with traffic, and a crowd had gathered around the restaurant, tourists and local Chinese craning their necks for a glimpse of the excitement.

Kwok left the car in the middle of the street and jumped out. He barged a path through the crowd, Lacey behind him.

There were at least half a dozen uniformed police controlling the scene. They seemed relieved to see CID.

'Upstairs, sir,' one of them said.

The injured policeman was propped against the wall. His partner was holding a tea towel against the side of his head. There was blood on the floor, another man lying face down in the middle of it, among a litter of mah-jongg tiles and upturned chairs. A Chinese in a white vest stood beside the stairs, watching.

Lacey snapped open her identity wallet. 'Detective Inspector Lacey. This is Detective Sergeant Kwok.'

'Constable Martin Boon,' the first policeman said. He had a red tab on the sleeve of his uniform to indicate he was an English speaker.

'What the hell's going on?' Lacey snapped.

'A chopping, sir,' Boon said. 'We were on a routine patrol and we heard shouts from the street. A couple of tourists ran to fetch us, told us there had been a fight.'

'Is he all right?' Lacey said, bending down to examine the bleeding policeman.

'He slipped on the blood at the top of the stairs,' Boon said. 'I think he's concussed.'

'Dew neh loh moh,' Kwok muttered.

'Where are the tourists?' Lacey asked Boon.

Boon shrugged helplessly.

Lacey heard the wail of an ambulance siren in the street outside. Soon there would be emergency personnel everywhere. Kwok pulled Boon to his feet. 'No one is to come in

or leave without the consent of Detective Inspector Lacey or myself. Absolutely no one, even other police or ambulance teams. Clear?'

Boon nodded. His face was ashen. It was just his second week out of training school. 'I'll see if I can find the tourists,' Kwok said, and went back downstairs.

Lacey made a quick sketch of the scene and the position of the body in her notebook. By the time she had finished, Kwok had returned. 'Gone,' he said. 'I order two of the constables to canvass the crowd for witnesses. Maybe we will be lucky.'

Lacey squatted down a few feet from the body. 'This looks like a bad leak,' she said.

The dead man's face was turned towards them, but Lacey could have guessed his identity just from his size and shape. 'Well, well. We know this one,' she said.

'The Onion. Terrible loss to humanity.'

'What do you think he was attacked with? A combine harvester?'

It had been a frenzied assault. There were gaping wounds on the shoulders, back and skull. The fatal wound had almost decapitated him. It was a classic triad assault. The intention of the chop was warning as well as a punishment; Red Pole enforcers never felt bullets had the same effect. It always seemed to her that there was something peculiarly vicious about killing someone this way, something uniquely Oriental. It was not as clinical as a gun; it made a lot more mess.

'This is what kills him,' Kwok said, indicating the deep laceration to the neck. 'Carotid artery,' he added, as if he was lecturing a group of new recruits. 'Look at these spray patterns up the wall. Whoosh! Like letting go of firehose.'

Lacey wrinkled her nostrils. She never minded the look of blood, but the metallic smell always made her slightly nauseous. She put on latex gloves and emptied the dead man's pockets, passing the contents to Kwok, who squatted alongside holding open the plastic evidence bags; a thick roll of Hong Kong five-hundred-dollar notes, a crocodile skin wallet, car keys on a leather Mercedes key ring.

Beside the body was a type 54 Chinese-made Makarov pistol.

'Black Star,' Kwok said.

Lacey pointed. A significant part of The Onion's hand lay under a table a few feet away. 'That's the trouble with guns. You need fingers to pull the trigger.'

Kwok flipped open the wallet: Tak, Kam-chau, HKID D-671783, date of birth 15/7/61. An address in the Mid-levels. 'Funny way to die. The Onion. All chopped up.'

Lacey shook her head. Ten o'clock at night and she was leaning over a badly mutilated body listening to jokes. Her father had tried to warn her; this was no way for a well-brought-up Church of England girl to make a living.

Her attention wandered to something lying under one of the tables, among the scattered mah-jongg tiles. 'Do you think it's a bit of ear or a bit of tongue?'

'Do not know, inspector.'

'Fascinating thing, the human body. You take little bits away and they never seem to match with anything. Like a jigsaw puzzle.'

Lacey peeled off her gloves and dropped them on the corpse. Boon indicated the ambulance crew were on the stairs but Kwok signalled to him to send them away. There was no rush to move the body. It could wait until after the forensic team and the coroner had finished their work.

She nodded to Kwok, indicating the Chinese in the vest who was watching, mute and apprehensive, at the other end of the room.

'What happened here?' Lacey said to him, in Cantonese.

There was a long shuffling silence.

'I think we must be severe with him,' Kwok said, in English. He leaned close to the man's face. 'You big mountain of dung,' he said, 'you were here, you saw what happened.'

You're wasting your breath. He knows the triad will kill him if he breathes a word, Lacey thought.

The old man cleared his throat. 'I would like to help you,' he said, 'but I was busy reading the newspaper. When I look up it is all over.'

Kwok shook his head. 'I think more better we find these tourists,' he said to Lacey.

Lacey nodded. 'We've got ourselves a serious problem

here. The press and television are going to eat this up.' They would promote it on their news bulletins as a full-scale triad war.

'Perhaps I can think of a headline for them.'

'Diced Onion,' they said, together.

Kwok giggled. 'This is not so funny. We must not laugh like this.'

'I'll save my tears for the innocents, Brian,' Lacey said, and went downstairs in a futile attempt to look for witnesses in the street.

28

Chinatown, San Francisco

On Grant Street Ruby was greeted with the familiar aromas of pickled ginger, soy sauce and cabbage. But she was immediately reminded that this was a stylised piece of chinoiserie, a version as fake and stylised as any in Disneyland. Tour guides shepherded knots of tourists from Kansas and Australia and Carolina and Germany along the streets, pointing out green-tiled roofs with roccoco curlicues no longer seen in China, stylised stone lions that had been copied from the Forbidden City, before being led into gaudy antique shops stuffed with ancient treasures just a few weeks old.

The real Chinatown was behind Grant, in the crowded tenements and the sweatshops where poor immigrant Chinese worked twelve-hour days for the minimum wage.

The beat of tom-toms and the clash of Chinese cymbals echoed along the street; a lion dance in progress. A firecracker exploded in a series of deafening blasts as the lion twisted and cavorted outside one of the restaurants for the money offering. The dancers performed in pairs, in short bursts of frenetic activity, before passing the costume on to their comrades. Two restaurant employees dangled the *lai tze*, the lion's food, a packet of money wrapped in red paper, from a string by the door.

The crowd around her was mostly tourists. Ruby wondered how many of them understood that the lion dance was the flagship of the triad in the area and that if the *lai tze* was not considered adequate the restaurant would tomorrow receive an unwelcome call from some 49 boys.

Ruby turned down a laneway and stopped outside a door with a handwritten sign that said:

Acupuncture
Master Chen Chong-po
Increase virility
Cures Baldness, poor digestion, bad luck
Guaranteed 100% effective

Next door was a restaurant called the Sui Lam. Dragons in good luck red and gold coiled up the pillars either side of the entrance, carp and lobsters hovered in two enormous tanks just inside the door.

Ruby went inside and looked around. Brokers with braces and designer pony-tails and elegant thirtysomething women in advertising were squeezed in shoulder to shoulder with the tourists in the raucous but elegant confines, waiters in tuxedos hovering over them. The Sui Lam was obviously good business.

Ruby said Henry Pi's name to the black-suited Chinese maitre d'. He led her through the restaurant to a private room at the rear. Henry Pi was there alone, a cigarette clamped between the second and third fingers of his left hand, a pot of Iron Buddha tea on the table in front of him.

'Ruby-ah,' he said, and his wet lips split into an unctuous smile.

Ruby shook his hand – he held it too long, caressing it in his damp palm – and sat down.

'Good to see you again, Ruby-ah. You look very beautiful. Not good for me to look so wonderful.' He patted his chest. 'I got a bad heart.'

Full of worms, like a pig, Ruby thought.

'Give rest of this hand for one night with you, Ruby-ah,' he whispered.

'Must be blind, never mind,' Ruby said. Big heap of leper turd, I would rather copulate with a dog!

Henry Pi nodded to the maitre d', who hurried away. 'Eat first, then we talk business,' Henry Pi said.

The remains of the meal was scattered on the table between them; lobster tails, crab meat and shrimp balls, slices of goose

growing cold in its own grease. Henry Pi sipped the dark, bitter tea and lit another cigarette.

'So, Ruby-ah,' he said, 'pleased to report all twelve and a half chickens arrive in San Francisco safe.'

'Just one problem,' Ruby said.

'Problem?'

'Cannot pay you six hundred cash right now. Perhaps because we are good friends, we can make an arrangement.'

Henry Pi looked amused. 'What sort of arrangement?'

'You keep one and a half chicken. At one-thirty for one chicken, that is one-ninety-five. Can give you the rest cash. Got a deal, okay?'

Henry Pi threw back his head and laughed. He laughed so hard his jowls quivered under his chin.

'What is so funny, heya?'

'You are some piece of business, Ruby–ah.'

'I am giving you a good deal.'

Henry Pi leaned across the table. 'Now I will give you my deal. My deal is this: I do not give you your chicken back. I sell it all, make a very big profit, and I am very happy. But I am a generous man, as everyone will tell you. So I will pay for this lunch.'

Ruby felt the world spin. She actually found her fingers gripping the edge of the table, as if she was about to fall. 'You got my chicken.'

'No, Ruby–ah. I don't have your chicken. I got Crazy Eddie's chicken. But who is going to tell him?'

You stinking pile of dog vomit, Ruby thought. The food she had eaten congealed like cold fat in her stomach. What a beautiful and precise trap this son of a whore's left tit had laid for her!

'You fucking cheat me,' Ruby said, hardly able to believe what was happening.

'You act too bloody big, Ruby–ah. If you want to sell your chicken, you must have a tiger with very sharp claws to guard it. But where is your tiger, Ruby–ah? He is at home in Hong Kong. And you cannot ask him to help you now, because if he washes me, he will wash you also, because you are the one who cheats him first.'

'We can talk about this. Want you to be my partner, okay. Not just this deal. I got many deals, I can make you a very rich guy.'

'I am already a very rich guy,' Henry Pi said, with a soft and golden smile.

'Ruby Wen is going to kill you, fucking your mother!'

'You are stupid, Ruby–ah.' He held up his crippled hand. 'Guy who did this, he takes my finger. I take his whole fucking arm!'

Ruby stared at him. A few weeks ago she had had a share in two hundred kilos of number four, a fortune. Now it was all gone. She had burned incense to the gods every day, left fruit and red notes at the temple, and this was her joss.

'Swear I will kill you,' she said.

Henry Pi waved his crippled hand towards the door in dismissal. 'Go defecate in your grandfather's ear.'

The room was spinning. She staggered out, knocking over a carved screen near the door, hardly aware of the other diners staring after her.

Wanchai police station, Hong Kong

Lacey sat across the desk from the old man in the vest. His hands fidgeted with a packet of Mild Sevens. He wanted to smoke, badly, but Lacey wouldn't let him. They had kept him at the police station since the murder the night before, and he had been interviewed by three different detectives, giving three entirely different accounts of the night's events. But their threats of prosecution for perjury, and the punishments he could expect – vastly exaggerated – did not make him waver. He was not about to speak out against The Onion's killers. At that moment, Lacey knew, he feared the Sun Yee On more than he feared the police.

His eyes shifted nervously around the room, never once meeting hers. There was a strong odour of sweat coming from him.

Lacey had a Parker in her right hand and a yellow legal

notepad resting on the table in front of her. She took her glasses from her jacket pocket and put them on. 'Let's go through this again, Mister Ng,' she said. 'Now, you said there were three men?'

Ng looked confused. 'Four men.'

'Interesting,' Lacey said. 'In our first interview you told me there were three men. You told Chief Inspector Tyler four, you told Detective Sergeant Kwok you could not remember, and when Detective Poon asked you the same question you said you were looking out of the window the whole time and didn't realise anything was wrong until the police came.'

Ng turned the cigarette packet over and over with his fingers. 'It's a long time ago. It's none of my business. One must not interfere with the decisions of the gods.'

Lacey covered her face with her hand to hide a smile. 'And what happened when these three or four men came into your mahjongg parlour?'

'I don't know.'

'A man was chopped to death with meat cleavers right in front of you and you didn't see what happened?'

'I thought it was just someone arguing over a game.'

Lacey knew this was hopeless. The old man was terrified. Even if he does talk he'll only recant everything tomorrow, she thought. Like my fisherman friend. What the hell does it matter? Let them kill each other. It's one less for us to worry about.

In sheer frustration she snatched the packet of Mild Sevens out of his hands and left him without comfort in the interview room.

Tyler was waiting for her in the corridor, eating a chicken sandwich. Like Lacey, he had dark shadows under his eyes. 'Any good?'

Lacey shook her head.

'The tourists we were looking for just reported in to police headquarters. They heard the appeal on the television in their hotel. Middle-aged German couple from Frankfurt.'

'Anything?'

Tyler shook his head. 'All they saw was four men running down the stairs and out the door. All happened too fast they

said.' Tyler saw the cigarettes in her hand. 'Joined the legion of the damned, Lace?'

'Just torturing my prisoner.'

Tyler stretched, yawning. Twenty hours they'd been working on this, and just three or four hours sleep snatched in the early hours of the morning. 'There's a war going on out there. Which I don't mind about, they can shoot the living shit out of each other for all I care. But one day there's going to be a police officer or some young innocent in the way.' He looked at his watch. Almost six o'clock. 'Let's go home. I refuse to lose any more sleep over some chap named after a vegetable.'

Lacey nodded towards the interview room. 'Shall I send him home?'

'Yes, and give him his cigarettes back. We don't want to get reported to Amnesty.'

At five o'clock the next afternoon Lacey and Tyler were summoned to Arsenal Street. A special task force had been established to oversee the investigation into the Johnston Road slayings and the murder of The Onion. They were to continue their investigations of all four homicides but liaise daily with headquarters. The Commissioner himself was taking an interest in both cases. The message was clear; they were to get convictions, and they were to get them quickly.

Tyler and Lacey did not speak in the elevator; they were both drained, physically and emotionally. The lift stopped on the tenth floor.

A man ran for the lifts, just as the doors were closing. Lacey instinctively reached out and held the doors open. Keelan jumped in.

'Thanks,' he said.

'No sweat.'

She felt him watching her as the lift went down. 'Look at those rings under your eyes. Go out with your uncle last night?'

Lacey forced a smile. 'You know what it's like in Serious Crimes. Every night's a party.'

The lift doors opened and Lacey headed across the foyer. It was a three-minute walk to the mini-bus stop. She heard Keelan run after her.

'Detective Lacey.'

She turned around.

He looked suddenly big and clumsy. 'I know you said the other day that you didn't think it was a good idea but . . . can I buy you a drink?'

She looked over his shoulder. Tyler was watching. 'Are you showing off in front of my colleague?'

Keelan turned around. Tyler smiled and walked away across the car park.

'Look, I've had a very long and wearying day. I just want to go home, have some dinner and go to bed.'

'Just one drink. It will help you unwind.'

Usually she would have bitten at that, but she was too tired. Instead, she said: 'What about your wife, Lieutenant Keelan?'

'Jesus,' he said, under his breath. 'Look, I'm asking you to join me for a drink. That's it. If you want to call Vice and have them arrest me as a sexual deviate, go ahead.'

It was Lacey's turn to be embarrassed. 'It's just difficult for me, Lieutenant Keelan. You don't seem to appreciate that.'

Tyler waved from the gates.

To hell with it. She did need to unwind. It had been a rough couple of days. 'Ever been to Delaney's?' she said.

He shook his head.

'Don't tell anyone. I have a reputation as a frigid bitch to maintain.'

And why was that? she wondered, as she walked out of the gates into the concrete and carbon monoxide corridors of Wanchai. She knew what they called her in the mess: Icey. Detective Inspector Icey. The Chinese detectives in her squad were a little more poetic; their nickname for her roughly translated to The Perfumed Dragon.

It was never overt, of course. But still.

And she was not sure she had not fostered it. She had struggled too hard against her own femininity. A lifetime's

habit. A result of being the only girl in a family of five. And the only one to follow in the old man's shoes.

It had been her rule ever since she joined the Royal Hong Kong Police Force; don't mix work with sex. But because she was married to her job, the result was enforced abstinence. The only men she met were from inside the force, and she never let any of them meet her socially, as the euphemism went.

At first her coolness had been a self-imposed regime. After a while it had become a habit. Now it had hardened, like iron, into part of her soul.

Of course, she was lonely. But she had her job. And her job was important, and she was a rising star. It helped her forget.

Delaney's was on the first floor of a commercial building in Jaffe Road. It was one of the few bars in Wanchai that had not tried to style itself after one of the pre-fab British pubs that could be found in the basements of high-rises all over Kowloon and Central. It was crowded with young ex-pats. Lacey fought her way to the bar and shouted her order over the bar.

'Not your usual type of place,' she said to him. 'Sorry.'

'How do you mean?'

'The waitresses all have their shirts on.'

'That was your relative. He's bad news.'

'Tell me about it.'

He eyed the large glass of black liquid in front of her. 'You really drink that stuff?'

'Guinness. It's a food. My grandmother had half a pint of it a day on prescription from her doctor. Well. Now that you've got me here, what are we going to do?'

He shrugged. 'I'm kinda new at this.'

'That's a novel approach.' She drank her beer and watched him. The Ice Maiden and the married man. Who would have thought? 'Why did you ask me out, Lieutenant? Was it a kind of challenge?'

'You know, you're kind of . . .'

'Aggressive?'

'Ballsy.'

'It comes with the territory. Girls with tissue boxes on the desk don't get very far in the Serious Crimes Squad.'

'I guess not.'

'You like ballsy women, Lieutenant?'

'John will do. And in answer to your question, I guess the answer is yes. At least, I like you.'

He looked right in her eye when he said it, and she felt herself blush hot. That made her feel foolish and she looked away, feeling flattered and furious at once.

'How long have you been a cop, Lace?'

'I joined the Royal Hong Kong Police straight from school. It was all I ever wanted to do.'

'Yeah? Civic responsibility or just a sense of adventure?'

'There's nothing like slapping a pair of handcuffs on a man and telling him to spread 'em to get a girl hot, you must have realised that by now.'

His eyes were flint grey she noticed, with hazel flecks in the right eye. Her acupuncturist would make something of that. They were sad eyes, even when he was smiling, as he was now. But he did not seem distracted tonight. She had his complete attention, and she was flattered by it.

'So what will you do when the red hordes come streaming over the border? Maybe Tiananmen might just be up to your speed.'

'The red hordes are already here, they have been for decades. We all wonder how many sleepers there are in our departments, waiting to take over from us in 1997. Everyone seems to think the barman in the Arsenal Street mess is actually the head of the Chinese Secret Police.'

'You're going to stay?'

'If I went back to England, it would be like emigrating to a foreign country. I spent three years there at boarding school, and that's it.'

'Beijing may make your job easier. Thing about the Chinese, they cut out a lot of red tape. Hell, it's easier to shoot someone than go through the aggravation of arresting them and then having to get evidence.'

She shrugged. 'I used to think the Chinese hard liners would

drive the triads out of Hong Kong when they took over. Now I'm not so sure.'

'I thought the communists hated the tongs.'

'The Chinese are pragmatists. Money talks all languages but its mother tongue is Cantonese.'

Lacey's pager interrupted her. She unclipped it from her belt and read the message. 'Won't be a moment,' she said, and went to look for a phone outside.

'Charlotte,' she said when she came back.

'Sounds like a code name. One of your CI's?'

'My housemaid. She wants to know what time I'll be home for dinner.'

'Your maid rings you on your pager to tell you to get your ass home for dinner? This doesn't fit with the image, Lace.'

'Sometimes I defy her and don't eat my desserts.'

Keelan studied her in the silence that followed. No make-up, no jewellery of any kind. Not even perfume. She wore a long grey rain jacket, an apricot shirt, a grey woollen skirt. What he had heard the ex-pats call sensible shoes, with a slightly derisive tone in their voices. Smartly functional. Yet as she leaned across the bar for a handful of peanuts he glimpsed the edge of a black lace bra.

She noticed his stare and he looked away. She pushed her ash-blonde hair out of her eyes and watched him. Christ, eyes that could melt butter, he thought. She could even out-glare my old station sergeant.

'So. Now that Eddie Lau has walked away from us again, has the DEA any further official business with my department?'

'No, ma'am.'

'So why did you want to see me, Lieutenant Keelan?'

By instinct he pulled a packet of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, and then he remembered, and put them away again.

'Have you always been a smoker?'

He shook his head. 'It's a self-destructive habit. I know what it's doing to me, you don't have to lecture me.'

She smiled. 'I wouldn't dream of it. And you still haven't answered my question.'

It had been twelve years since Keelan had taken out any woman who was not his wife. He suddenly found himself embarrassed and nervous. He looked away. 'I wanted to see you. On a personal basis.'

Lacey picked up her beer. She studied him over the rim of her glass. 'I thought you were married.'

'Was.'

'Really?'

'You don't believe me.'

'I just want to know exactly where I stand. I'm not making moral judgements.'

'We're separated.'

'Of course. By the Pacific Ocean.'

'No, I mean permanently.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'They all say that.' She finished her drink and set it down decisively on the bar.

'Well, maybe we can do this again sometime,' he said.

She hoisted her bag on her shoulder. She gave him a long, speculative look, and then seemed to make up her mind. 'Hungry?' she said.

'Always.'

'Good. I've told Charlotte to expect a guest for dinner.'

'How did she take that?'

'I'm not afraid of my maid,' Lacey said. But then she added: 'When we get there, you go in first.'

29

Lacey's apartment was off Pokfulam Road, the fourth floor of the block. Lacey led him inside. He had imagined something modern and functional, but the interior was quite different. The furnishings could have been plundered from an English cottage; an oak hallstand, thick rugs on the parquet floors, and off to the left in the dining room a beech dining table and sideboard. The walls and sideboard were crammed with framed photographs, many of them black and white. There was even an antelope's head on the wall.

'Not very politically correct, is it?' Lacey said.

'Was this a police involved shooting?'

'Kenya. My grandfather. I have a very colonial past.'

Charlotte appeared from the kitchen. Keelan had imagined a wizened hump-backed Chinese with a black pigtail but Charlotte looked to be younger than Lacey, a slight and pretty Filipina with piercing dark eyes. They took in Keelan at a glance. Now he knew what it felt like to be in a police line-up.

'Charlotte, this is Lieutenant John Keelan. He's joining me for dinner tonight.'

'Hi, Charlotte.'

Charlotte frowned. The gold crucifix at her throat glowed in the dull light of the hallway lamp. 'He is a *yanqui*?' she whispered to Lacey.

'It's all right,' Lacey whispered back, and grinned at Keelan. 'He's never even heard of Clark Air Base.'

Charlotte returned to the kitchen. 'Hey,' Keelan said, 'I was a big hit.'

'She doesn't like Americans. She'll probably poison your food. Do you mind?'

'Still beats eating alone.'

She led him into the living room. Two Chesterfield leather sofas the colour of old port, a teak coffee table with legs carved in the shape of elephant's feet. Even a tiger-skin rug on the floor. More photographs, but some of these in Kodachrome. A collection of jade and ceramic elephants. In China they were talismans for good luck.

'Time warp,' Keelan said.

'My father left these behind when he went back to England. We used to have a house in the Mid-levels. This all looks better in the right surroundings but I could never bear to part with any of it.' She pointed to the photographs on the wall. 'That's me and my brothers at Dad's sixtieth two years ago. He's living in Gloucester now.'

'Four brothers. That must have been tough.'

'They were okay. It was living with Dad that was hard.' She quickly pointed out another photograph, an oak-framed black and white, perhaps thirty years old. 'That was my mother. She died a couple of years ago. Patience of a saint, God rest her soul.'

'She's very pretty.' He resisted the obvious cliché. 'You're more like your old man.'

She looked up at him. 'That's truer than you know.'

'Any of your brothers become cops?'

'Dad would have liked them to. But they didn't. Just me. I think it broke his heart. He wanted me to be a nurse.'

Keelan looked around. 'Being a cop in Hong Kong must pay well,' he said.

It was an innocent observation, but he was unprepared for the reaction. 'Did you get that from my uncle?' she said.

'Get what?'

'He's got a big mouth,' she said. 'I have to check on Charlotte,' she said, and walked out of the room.

The table was set for dinner. Charlotte had prepared *sini gang*, a sour soup flavoured with tamarinds, mangoes and limes, and a fish curry. There was a bottle of mineral water in the middle of the table. 'She disapproves of drinking,' Lacey told Keelan, after Charlotte had left the room.

'And I figured you were tough.'

'Good help is hard to find. I humour her.'

'Sure you do. Even down to the fish on Friday.'

'I hadn't thought of that.'

The curry was very good, Keelan had to admit. Damn good. Perhaps there was a reason for humouring her. 'Are you a Catholic?' Keelan asked her.

'God, no. We're a good English family. No Papists in our stock.'

'That must really stick in Charlotte's craw.'

Lacey lowered her voice. 'Her room's like the Sistine Chapel. There's holy pictures everywhere. And candles. Forget Chunking Mansions, I'm the biggest fire risk in Hong Kong.'

Keelan laughed. 'Has she tried to convert you?'

'I still have some authority left, thanks.'

Their talk drifted inevitably to work, to policing in Hong Kong, to narcotics.

'How long have you been with the DEA?' she asked him.

'Nearly seven years. I did Vice and Homicide in San Diego before they recruited me. It was a good grounding. The two kind of go together. You ever find that?'

'And this is your first overseas posting?'

'I'm a home bird. I was doing some okay undercover work in San Francisco. You can only do that for so long.'

'So why Hong Kong?'

'I told my boss I needed to do some shopping. New video, computer, that sort of thing.'

'And your family's still in San Francisco?'

It was a loaded question and they both knew it. He stared out of the window for a while and she was about to repeat her question when he said: 'I don't really want to talk about that if you don't mind.'

'You're having dinner in my apartment. I think it's fair I know the exact nature of our relationship.'

'They . . .' He drifted again, and his gaze seemed to turn inward. 'They were killed.'

Lacey had not been prepared for that. She had assumed he would maintain the line that they were separated, and she

would have to divine the truth of it. But this bald assertion left a sudden chill in the room.

'They?'

He toyed with the gold ring on his finger, turning it round very fast. 'I had a wife and eleven-month-old daughter. They died a year ago.'

'How?'

'A car crash. Look, I find this hard to talk about. Can we change the subject?' His eyes were hard and angry.

Lacey decided to leave it alone. 'I'll see if Charlotte's made coffee,' she said and got up and went to the kitchen.

When she came back Keelan was standing at the window, his hands deep in his pockets. He looked contrite. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'That was rude.'

'It doesn't matter.'

'You won't set Charlotte onto me?'

'Keep your voice down, she can hear you,' Lacey said, but she was smiling. 'I'll have to wear all this later. How do you have your coffee?'

'Weak, sweet and white. Like my women.'

She looked up. 'I could tell that the first time I saw you.'

'What about you?'

'Straight and black.'

It had been a long time since Lacey had flirted with a man. Lately she had attracted one separated architect and two intense young lawyers. She was beginning to lose confidence.

Now there was this enigmatic American. She brought the coffees to the window. The lights of a tanker moved slowly against the blackness of the Lantau Channel.

She studied him closely. 'Who shaves you?'

'I do.'

'Get glasses or go to a barber.'

'You do talk straight from the hip. Next you're going to be dumping on me about my clothes sense.'

'Funny you should mention it.'

The faraway look again, without warning. 'I've let my act slip lately. Maybe it's time I did something about that.'

'It's great for undercover work. You look just like a seedy, small-time drug operator.'

'Thanks. That's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me.'

'You're welcome.'

It happened suddenly. He had his coffee in his left hand. He reached out with his right, and stroked her hair. She rose on tip toes. He was about to kiss her. She was amazed and delighted.

'Miss Lacey?'

She turned around. It was Charlotte. She was wearing a long dressing gown, buttoned from neck to knee. She was holding a Spanish Bible.

Lacey whirled around, furious and embarrassed. 'What is it?'

'I go to bed now.'

'Very well.'

Charlotte hovered another few seconds, before disappearing along the passage. Lacey turned back to Keelan but the moment was gone.

30

When Ruby stepped off the Cathay Pacific flight from the West Coast at nine o'clock that morning she took a taxi straight to the funeral parlour in Wanchai. Eddie had phoned her in San Francisco to tell her what had happened to The Onion. She didn't give a damn about that fat eater of turtle dung but it was a triad funeral and she had to be there to show her loyalty to her *tai lo*.

Vincent wore a shiny black suit, a black silk shirt and a black leather tie. He was wearing Porsche wrap-around sunglasses, even in the gloom of the funeral parlour. He still wore the scars from the beating the three Sun Yee On blue lanterns had given him. She had heard how he had wept and crawled like a girl. He had lost face, big face. Behind his sunglasses his eyes were still swollen, the bruises fading from purple to custard yellow. His walked stiffly, his ribs still strapped, and the stitches on his forehead and cheek were livid against his pale skin. Now that his nose cartilage had been re-aligned by the Ladder Street steps he did not look as pretty any more.

Ruby looked around the foyer. There was a knot of mourners in one corner, a few of The Onion's horses from Wanchai in their sharp black suits and western style haircuts.

So like Eddie to have his own funeral parlour. Even when he lost one of his soldiers, he made money out of it.

Vincent handed her an armband. 'Come to cry for Ah Chau?' he said. He barely moved his lips when he spoke, trying to disguise the fact that his orthodontist had not yet finished replacing lost teeth.

Ruby took the proffered armband and an envelope of lucky money. 'Have cried a river of tears,' Ruby said.

'You should put the armband where everyone can see it most easily,' Vincent said to her. 'Your thigh maybe.'

Ruby let the insult pass. 'Where's Eddie-ah?'

Vincent nodded to a door that led inside to the main parlour.

'Heard the boys who beat you were still at school,' she whispered and pushed past him.

The air was thick with incense. The Onion lay in an open casket, illuminated by two spotlights on the walls above. A paper banner suspended on the wall behind the casket said: 'May your next life be long and brave, like a lion!' in huge red characters. A framed photograph stood on an easel to one side, surrounded by wreaths. On a table in front of the casket a meal had been prepared to sustain him on his journey to the afterlife, mangoes and ham *shui kok* and pieces of cut watermelon and *sui lung bau*.

The Onion's body was covered with scraps of paper covered with Chinese characters, letters from his Wo Sing Wo brothers, promising to avenge his death. The letters would go with him to his grave.

The embalmer had done a good job, Ruby decided. The Onion looked almost human, something he had failed to do in life. The family would not see the patchwork of stitches underneath the suit. From what Ruby had heard, it was only his shirt keeping all the bits together. They had stitched his right hand to one of the sleeves.

'You forgot the sunglasses,' Ruby said in a stage whisper to Vincent.

Eddie was sitting in one of the front pews, staring at the casket. Ruby bowed three times to the body, as tradition demanded and sat down beside him. Vincent sat in the row behind.

Eddie had his hands in his lap, staring straight ahead. He consulted the diamond-studded Rolex on his wrist. 'Open the doors at eleven o'clock,' he said to Vincent.

Vincent knew he was being dismissed. He scowled at Ruby and went out. The door clicked shut behind him, the sound echoing around the marble-tiled room.

'The Ox did this.'

'You are sure?'

'Two of the men in the mah-jongg parlour recognise the leader. A Sun Yee On Red Pole. One of The Ox's horses.'

Eddie fell silent for a while, but his right foot tapped impatiently on the floor. 'See this photograph of Ah Chung?' he said at last, pointing to The Onion's framed photograph beside the casket. 'His family still lives in Swatow. I got this photograph from a friend in the police department. When I get it enlarged, they have to cut the numbers off the bottom.'

'What are you going to do, heya?'

'Ah Chung is chopped in my own mah-jongg parlour. I lose face now, big face. I must pay back this insult, and revenge Ah Chung.' He got up and stood over the casket. 'Look at this.'

Ruby obediently got up and joined him at the casket. She felt Eddie's hand go around her shoulders, slowly, like a spider walking over the bare flesh of her shoulders. She braced herself. His mood had changed again, without warning. There was ice in the air. He was dangerous.

'Look,' he repeated.

'What am I looking at, okay?' She felt the thrill in the pit of her belly, fear and excitement in a confusing, breathless mix.

'Peter Mui comes to see me yesterday, Ruby-ah,' he whispered. He bunched a knot of her hair into his fist and pulled back, hard.

'Peter Mui is the gristle of a dead dog.'

'Says you owe him money. Says you owe him seven hundred thousand dollars.'

'Six.'

'Six hundred thousand is last week, fucking your mother! This week it is seven.' His face was close to hers. 'How can you lose so much so fast, Ruby? I warn you before!'

'It is the last time, I promise!'

He forced her head down, made her look into the casket. 'What do you see, Ruby-ah?'

He is going to kill me this time, she thought. He's crazy. This time he really will kill me for this.

'I will tell you what you see! You see dead! Nothing after this, Ruby-ah! No ancestors to take you to a happy life, no children to clean your bones! Just dead, Ruby-ah, just your pretty bones mouldering in the ground!'

'Eddie . . .'

'If not for Eddie, this Peter Mui sells your debt to the triad, they will wash you, aiy-eeah!'

'It is the last time,' Ruby pleaded. 'I don't gamble no more, Eddie, I promise!'

'You make promises like a pig shits! When you feel like it!' He yanked her head back and she almost cried out. She knew what he was going to do and the pleasure and pain were inseparable.

'You help me?'

'Always help you, don't I, Ruby-ah?' His hands went around her tiny waist, the fingers almost meeting, as if they were around her throat. He pulled her towards him. 'Love me, Ruby-ah?' he whispered, in English.

'Love you too much, baby,' she said.

'Can never love me too much. Where can you go if there is no Eddie to look after you, to be your big brother?' He hiked her short leather skirt over her hips.

'Be careful of my stockings,' Ruby whispered to him. The cashmere stockings she had on had cost her eleven hundred Hong Kong dollars.

His hands rested on the casket on either side of her. She watched the second hand moving swiftly on the face of the watch. Three minutes to the hour. 'Eleven o'clock. Vincent opens the doors,' he whispered. 'Going to see us, Ruby-ah. Everyone come in and see us.'

She imagined Vincent and all the horses filing in, followed by the professional mourners, seeing them, bent over the casket. She imagined their faces. It was enough. She came quickly, as he knew she would, gasping and arching her back to meet him. He groaned with her, and she felt his weight collapse on top her.

She opened her eyes and saw The Onion's face, badly stitched like an old toy, and her nose was filled with the taint of embalming fluid.

'Sex and death,' Eddie whispered. 'Always together. Without sex and death, there is no life.'

He's crazy, she thought. Crazy as me.

'This morning I transfer seven hundred to your account, Ruby-ah. Now you can pay Peter Mui.'

'Will pay you back. Promise.'

He zipped himself up and took his place in the pew. 'Eleven o'clock,' he said.

Ruby turned away from the casket, hitching up her silk underwear and smoothing down her skirt. A moment later the door to the foyer opened and Vincent led in the mourners. Ruby caught his stare, felt Eddie's wetness between her legs and felt the hot rush of pleasure to her cheeks, the flush of a gamble she had won.

As she sat down next to Eddie she saw Vincent watching her. He knew. She saw the unmistakable traces of his hatred on his face and she shuddered. One day, of course, he would try to kill her. But it was another gamble she was willing to take.

31

It was the heart of what they called the chuppie area, the upmarket district of Central around Wellington and D'Aguilar with the French bistros and gay bars, with names like 1997 and the 97 Club. Following in this same dark tradition Vincent had opened a small restaurant-diner called the Tiananmen Deli, all chrome and black marble, serving cheeseburgers and malted milk shakes during the day, at night and on weekends transforming itself to a supper club where some of Hong Kong's most confused young men shimmered and swayed and strutted under laser lights, in front of in-house monitors screening Abba and Pet Shop Boys music videos.

Eddie lounged in a black vinyl banquette smoking a cigarette, idly stirring a chocolate milk shake with a straw. Vincent sat beside him, eating Haagen Vaz ice cream with a spoon. In Hong Kong ice cream was an expensive luxury, the Haagen Vaz the most expensive of all.

Eddie reached out and ran an index finger gently along the line of Vincent's cheek. 'When this heals you will be beautiful again, Ah Lam.'

Vincent jerked away.

'What is the matter?'

'Should have been me washed those sons of lepers, not The Onion.'

'You are my Paper Fan, Ah Lam. Not a soldier.'

'They took away my face.'

'They have gone back to the West. You have big face again now.'

Vincent looked sulky. Sometimes I do not understand the labyrinths of your mind, Eddie thought.

'There is seven hundred thousand gone from our accounts to Ruby Wen,' Vincent said.

'That is my business.'

'To pay her gambling debts.'

Eddie sat up and stubbed out his cigarette. 'Ruby Wen is my business.'

Vincent finished his ice cream. He took a calculator from his pocket, punched in some figures and pushed it across the table to Eddie. 'This is how much she costs us in the last six months.'

Eddie picked up the machine with his right hand and cracked the plastic covering with his fist, then slammed it face down on the marble table top. 'Ruby Wen is my business,' he hissed.

The two staff behind the soda fountain looked across, frightened, expecting violence. But he will not harm me, Vincent thought. Anyone else, he might perhaps open to the light. But not me. And, fucking his mother, not Ruby Wen either.

'You are like a blind man, Eddie-ah. You hear Ruby Wen rattle her cup and you just drop money in, like she is a beggar.'

'Seven hundred thousand. Lose more than this down the seat in my car.'

'What about the two hundred kilo of white powder?' Vincent whispered.

'Fucking your mother.'

'She was the only other one who knows! Just you and Li Kam-chuen and her! Not even I know the rendezvous that night!'

'Ruby Wen will never cheat Eddie Lau. Not even if they burn her with hot irons!'

'Li Kam-chuen is an old man and he is not brave. The Onion said that when he dies, he is still screaming that he does not steal our powder. I believe the old man.'

Eddie picked up his glass and threw it across the bar, the chocolate-flavoured milk and shards of glass spraying down the chrome bar. 'Fucking your mother!' he screamed. 'Not your business!'

He stormed out. His Porsche was parked in the lane. Vincent heard the angry growl of the twin exhaust as he drove off.

Vincent called over his manager. 'Clean up the mess,' he said.

Clean up the mess. Which was what he always did for Eddie Lau. So much trouble from this Ruby Wen! He would have liked to have stuffed the seven hundred thousand dollars down her throat and make her choke on it.

Happy Valley

The trainers were parading their horses before the start of the three o'clock race; behind them, in the middle of the track, the electronic numbers on the Tote were flicking over as money was placed on different horses, narrowing or lengthening the odds. Standing at the rail Ruby Wen caught a glimpse of Sir Timothy Man, one of the colony's wealthiest men, chatting to his jockey. She knew him as Ah Kung, Grandfather, Eddie's *tai lo*. She hoped he would invite her up to his private box, but he saw her and looked away.

Eater of turtle dung. She would watch the race from the bar of the Jockey Club instead.

'Ruby Wen!'

She turned back. The speaker was a Thai-Chinese, an unremarkable-looking man with a brown cherubic face and the toothy smile of a bank clerk. But it was his clothes that defined him; a double-breasted woollen pin-striped suit, hand-crafted shoes, Gucci silk tie and a Dunhill eighteen-carat gold Elite wristwatch.

Louis Huu. The powder she had stolen from the trawler six weeks ago had belonged to his father. Which was not a coincidence as Big Boss Huu, as he was known, was one of Bangkok's five major heroin dealers, and Ruby herself had negotiated the deal with him.

He was beaming at her. 'You look very beautiful, Ruby-ah. Wearing lucky red.' Ruby was wearing her red leather Claude Montana suit with the power shoulders; for luck, and for vanity. He reached out and touched the material with his fingers. 'Perhaps now you will change my joss. I lose the last three races.'

'Then perhaps you must learn to run faster,' she said.

Louis Huu thought this amusing. 'You are a very crazy girl, Ruby-ah. Very crazy. You got a number in this race?'

Ruby nodded. 'Number two, Lucky Gem.'

'I have number seven, Golden King. Perhaps I will break your luck.' The eyes in the cherubic face had turned to steel. He turned and looked up at the stands. 'Which box are you in?'

'Watching the races today from the Jockey Club.'

'Then you must take afternoon tea with me. I am a guest of Timothy Wong. You know Timothy Wong? He is a very big guy in Hong Kong. I will introduce you.'

Ruby had heard of Timothy Wong. He was said to be the 489 of the Sun Yee On triad. She thought, in the circumstances, they might not have a lot to say to each other. But it would not do to refuse Louis Huu.

He led her through the barriers and check-points to the members' elevator, and they rode up to the top tier of the stands. Timothy Wong's box was like all the others, noisy with laughter and the squeals of the women, the air rich with the aromas of rich food and perfume and cigarette smoke. Afternoon tea was being served, sandwiches and cakes were laid out on a buffet table, along with great pots of Indian tea served western style, with cream and sugar.

A waiter brought them tea in cups of bone china. Ruby's eyes wandered to the closed circuit television mounted on the walls and then to her own race card. Over the last two weeks the seven hundred thousand dollars Eddie had given her to pay off Peter Mui was dwindling rapidly. May all his family's property be ruined! She had lost two hundred and fifty thousand at Happy Valley and Shatin, another three hundred and fifty playing baccarat in Macao. But one big win and she could clear the debt and still make a profit. Her last hundred thousand was on Lucky Gem to win.

She felt the familiar tingling in her belly she always experienced when she stood on the brink, a sensation as unbearable to her as it was essential.

Louis Huu leaned towards her. 'Hoping while I am in Hong Kong to have a conversation with your boss,' he said, as

if the reason for the conversation would be a complete mystery to her.

'I am sure Eddie will be very happy to see an old friend,' she said.

'Well, you know, it is very strange. I have been in Hong Kong three days and I leave messages for him everywhere, and still he does not call me. I thought perhaps you might talk to him for me, Ruby-ah.'

'What do you want me to say?'

Louis Huu leaned closer and his voice became a whisper. 'I want you to tell him that the earth is soft and damp, and the worms are hungry.' For a moment the smile was gone and she shuddered. Then Louis Huu stepped away and pointed at the closed circuit television. 'The runners are on the track.'

Ruby was glad of the diversion, a chance to turn away from those malevolent brown eyes. She looked up at the screen. Lucky Gem was being led to its stall. It was a roan gelding, its jockey wearing lucky crimson and gold. Another omen. It was second on the card, two was also her lucky number, and a ruby was a gem. She felt the god of gamblers perched on her shoulder today, felt his sweet aniseed breath on her neck. One hundred thousand at six to one. Enough to pay back her debts to Peter Mui, at least.

Number seven ran onto the track, a big bay stallion.

'You have a lucky way?' Louis asked her.

'I go to the temple the morning of the race, give a money offering and light incense to Kuan Yin. Then I shake the *chim*, the first number is the race, the second number is the horse.'

'That is a good way,' Louis agreed. 'For myself, I consult a *feng shui* man, he is one hundred per cent reliable. Gives me my lucky numbers.' He gently took her elbow. 'Let's watch the race from the balcony.'

The private boxes were on the very top tier of the cantilevered stands with a dizzying view over the stadium. In the distance the grey monolithic slums of Happy Valley with their flagpoles of laundry rose stark against the backdrop of quarry scars. A world far removed from this one, Ruby thought, a long way from the Chambertin and champagne.

Or maybe not so far. Not so far that I cannot still smell the family pig at Shatin.

That is why I must win today.

The runners were in their stalls. The atmosphere was like a static charge, a big crowd in today, perhaps fifty thousand people. It was one of the last race days before the summer recess. Ruby had heard that as much money was wagered on the last race of the card at Happy Valley than in all the racecourses in England in one afternoon. And these days, with the Chinese take-over looming, the gambling had become frenetic. A big win could buy freedom in another country.

'You ever lose money, Ruby-ah, big money?'

She thought of the six hundred thousand that had filtered through her fingers in the last few weeks and she felt physically sick. 'Sometimes,' she said.

'I never lose,' he said. 'Not ever. I always find some way to make good my losses. Do you understand?'

Ruby understood. She wondered if Eddie would understand. Don't think so, she thought. Eddie always got too much pride.

There was a roar from the crowd and she turned back to the track. The runners were under way.

'You are a Buddhist?' Louis asked her, indicating the tiny gold Buddha that she wore on a chain at her throat.

Ruby shook her head. She hooked a finger inside the neck of her silk blouse and showed him the gold crucifix and the little jade elephant – Chinese symbol for good luck – hidden by her collar. 'Never can be too lucky,' she said.

Louis Huu laughed. 'Insurance. You are a wise girl. You are like me, you never leave luck to chance.' He laughed at his own joke.

Ruby looked over his shoulder. She saw Timothy Wong, resplendent in a dark wool suit with a bow tie, watching the race on the television, sipping champagne. Beside him were a group of London bankers, fat bulging over the collars of their two-tone blue pin-striped shirts. The bankers' wives, in their minks and diamonds, were jumping up and down and screeching with excitement like harridans in a fish market.

'You always lucky, Ruby?' Louis asked her. 'Good to be

lucky. But perhaps more better to own the horse. Like me. Make your own luck.'

Ruby turned back to the track. Lucky Gem was just in front at the last turn, holding the inside rail. She felt her mouth go dry. Six to one.

The horses jostled for position, and then a groan passed around the stadium as one of the horses went down, also bringing down a big grey behind it. The leading horses lengthened their strides, in the straight now, whips flying. Louis handed her his binoculars. Ruby focused on the leading horses. She could see the foam flecked along their flanks. Lucky Gem still had her head in front.

The noise of the crowd was deafening. Neck and neck. Golden King making up ground on the outside.

All gods concentrate on my joss!

They thundered past the winning post in a blur. But Ruby knew, knew she had won. She took a deep breath to calm herself, but as she handed the glasses back to her companion, her hand was shaking.

She gave him a soft smile. 'Guess it is okay just to be lucky,' she said.

'Perhaps.' He looked at the Totalisator board. Confirmation of the result had still not appeared on the screen. An anxious murmur passed around the stadium, like the buzzing of angry bees. 'The stewards have posted the objection flag,' Louis said, casually, as if it was of no consequence.

Ruby felt a stab of panic. She leaned on the rail for support. No! She could not lose this race, she could not face Eddie and tell him his seven hundred thousand was all gone!

Louis Huu was studying his race programme. 'You have a number for the next race, Ruby-ah?'

Ruby stared at him. The next race? If they disqualified Lucky Gem, she was finished, broke.

Timothy Wong wandered over. 'An interesting spectacle,' he said. 'We are second at the moment, I believe.'

'Perhaps I will still repay your hospitality,' Louis said. 'By the way may I introduce a friend of mine, Miss Ruby Wen.'

Timothy Wong took her hand and gave her a slight bow. English public school manners. Ruby stared at him, barely

able to speak. If the stewards upheld the objection, she had lost again. Eddie-ah would open her bones to the light for this.

'This is Mister Timothy Wong, one of Hong Kong's most illustrious citizens,' Louis was saying. 'I persuaded him to place his stake on my horse for this race. I hope I shall not disappoint him.' A roar from the crowd, anger and delight in a seething mixture. The numbers appeared on the Tote board in the centre of the track. First place, number seven. A voice on the Tannoy explained that Lucky Gem had been disqualified.

Ruby hurried away, through the box towards the elevators, leaving Louis Huu and her astonished host staring after her. She was scarcely aware of rushing through the check-points and turnstiles. Once outside she was physically sick in the street. A policeman on traffic duty stared at her in disgust.

She found a taxi and slumped into the rear seat and repeated her address in the Mid-levels, staring in mute shock at the afternoon traffic, wondering why the gods were so angry with her.

Got to have good luck soon, she thought.

No shit.

32

The Luk Yu teahouse was in a narrow street behind Queens Road Central, thrown into shadow by the tall office towers, the road constantly blocked by minibuses and delivery vans. A casual stroller could pass it every day and never notice the entrance.

But inside the teahouse was the repository of a more genteel age. Huge black fans turned slowly on the high ceilings – an affectation, Eddie noted, since the place was air conditioned – and the chairs were lacquered rosewood, the tables inlaid with marble. There were burnished brass spittoons and kettles on warming stands on the floor. Stained glass murals and framed Chinese scrolls decorated the walls.

Eddie Lau and Vincent Tse were shown to a mirrored private booth with a blackwood table and marble-backed benches. Pak Yok-kong, The Ox, was waiting for them, his Paper Fan, Peter Man, beside him.

Eddie and Vincent sat down.

Eddie took care to disguise his contempt for the man sitting opposite him. The Ox had once been a feared street fighter, his nickname derived from his strength and size, but now he looked fat and smug and soft. He wore a charcoal worsted suit, with a pink silk Nina Ricci tie, and there was a Cartier wristwatch with a crocodile strap on his left wrist.

I could snap his windpipe with one blow, Eddie thought.

There was a fifth man, grey-haired and sallow-cheeked, who looked exactly what he was, a law clerk from one of the nearby solicitor's offices. Now in his seventies, Tai Wai-chau still bore the rank of Incense Master in a branch of the 14K. He had been invited to the teapot talk to act as arbiter.

A waiter brought a pot of Cloud Mist tea and poured

five cups. The Ox tapped three fingers on the table in acknowledgement.

'May your health and prosperity increase tenfold,' The Ox said.

Eddie nodded his head in recognition of the toast and sipped the tea. It was aromatic and refreshing.

Introductions were made. Enquiries were made after the health of relatives, as custom demanded, and Mister Tai was congratulated on his longevity and his apparent health. No comment was made on Vincent's appearance, at the stitches and bruising still evident under his dark glasses, which he had not removed.

Finally the talk moved on to other things. 'Business is good?' Eddie asked his adversary.

The Ox put his hands on his knees. 'Heya, last month I bought my second Rolls-Royce. My wife wanted it painted pink. What can you do? I paid one hundred and fifty thousand dollars just for the licence plate.'

'I don't have such problems. I don't have a wife.'

The Ox chuckled. 'You're smart. More smart than me!' This was said with obvious insincerity. He nudged Peter Man as if it was a huge joke. 'I hear you got yourself some good business now,' he said to Eddie. 'You are a pretty damn clever fellow. I remember when you were just a punk.'

Eddie looked up, his fighting instincts alert, thinking The Ox was baiting him. But the other man was smiling, and his eyes were soft and beneficent.

The Ox took another sip of tea. 'Yes, you are a pretty damn fine fellow now.'

Eddie said nothing, waiting.

'Your family is lucky to have such a fine son. Must be proud of you, pretty damn businessman.'

Eddie balled a hand into a fist under the table. Yes, The Ox was baiting him now, he was sure of it. But for the moment he could not read the expression on the other man's face. Was it derision or fear?

The waiter brought a second pot of tea.

Mister Tai cleared his throat. When he spoke his voice was dry, like the rustling of old leaves. 'Perhaps now we

can discuss our business here,' he said. 'Perhaps to start with Lau Hsu–shui's complaint.'

Eddie leaned across the table. 'The Ox took something that belongs to me,' he said.

The Ox looked genuinely surprised. 'If I ever got something that belongs to Eddie Lau, I give it back.'

'I lose nearly two hundred kilos of little four. Maybe you know where my property is gone.'

The Ox looked at Peter Man in astonishment, then at Mister Tai. 'I don't know what *pin-mun* he is talking about. I don't deal in such evil, grandfather.' He turned back to Eddie. 'If you want my advice, neither should you.'

'I know about Martin Fong.'

The Ox shook his head. He was not smiling now. He looked aggrieved. 'You got no subtle, Eddie. Maybe you're not so smart, like they say you are.'

'Martin Fong was one of your horses.'

'Martin Fong was not acting on my orders, Eddie. If he was, he will not end up like a piece of barbecued pork.'

'Tell me what you want.'

'For myself I do not want anything, okay,' The Ox said, and suddenly he was smiling again. 'Just keep my wife happy, pay for my kids to go to good schools. Very expensive now, you know? I do a little business now and then. Perhaps can do business with you, Eddie. You and I should be good friends.'

Eddie said nothing and sipped his tea. Perhaps he could settle this right now with one blow.

Mister Tai spoke again. 'How can we settle this bad feeling between you?' he said, looking first at The Ox.

'Three weeks ago I have three young employees killed very badly in Wanchai. In a building I own myself. These are just young boys, and their families are very unhappy. I lose big face for this. Perhaps if I have five hundred thousand dollars I can give their families, it will be better.'

Vincent started to shout, Eddie laid a restraining hand on his arm. The Ox shook his head, dismayed at the outburst. It confirmed for him that Vincent, for all his outward sophistication, was just another Hakka peasant like Eddie Lau.

Five hundred thousand dollars, Eddie thought. I am not kowtowing to you, fucking your mother! But he swallowed his own rage. 'I also suffer great unhappiness,' he said, his voice even. 'One of my business associates is chopped in Jaffe Road. This looks very bad for me. His family and his Hung brothers are sworn to revenge. What can I do? Perhaps if my property is returned I can compensate for their grief and their lost face.'

The Ox contrived to look concerned. 'See you have a pretty damned situation, Eddie. But this is not my problem. I tell you, I do not have anything that belongs to Eddie Lau. I do not know how you can have this idea. But for five hundred thousand dollars, perhaps we can be friendly again. It will be more better for you.'

'Got plenty of friends already, heya,' Eddie said.

'Good to have a lot of friends,' The Ox said smiling. 'A man can never have too many.'

The waiter brought a third pot of tea. This time Mister Tai poured the tea, three fresh cups, the spout towards them. He placed them in front of The Ox. Eddie watched The Ox's hands. If he took the centre cup, it meant The Ox had agreed to compensate him for the loss of his powder. If he drank all three it meant war.

The Ox considered, then took the centre cup and drank it. Eddie waited and watched.

Then The Ox picked up the next two cups and drank them down also, one after the other.

Eddie thanked Mister Tai for his assistance, and he and Vincent left without another word.

Eddie's Mid-levels penthouse apartment had its own gymnasium, a large carpeted room fitted with the latest Nautilus equipment. A full length smoked glass window afforded dizzying views over the entire harbour.

Ruby stepped out of the shower, naked, drying her hair. She was sore from the previous night's lovemaking. Eddie had always been an imaginative lover, but never a gentle one.

She went down the passage to the gymnasium and watched him from the doorway. He wore just a pair of swimming trunks

and was bench-pressing seventy kilos. His body was hard and lithe, muscle bound to the bone in hard little knots. His body glistened with sweat, and the dragons tattooed on his upper arms squirmed and danced as if they had lives of their own.

He still did not know about the money. Perhaps he would never know, because now she had a plan to get it back. She had nothing to sell; her apartment and the BMW were both in Eddie's name, and she was too vain to part with her jewellery. Besides, there was no need for such drastic measures. She knew that next time she was going to win. She just needed another stake, a temporary loan. One of the casinos in Macao had offered her a line of credit up to one hundred thousand Hong Kong.

Eddie felt her watching him. 'I want you to go to Bangkok, Ruby-ah' he said.

'Bangkok?'

Eddie grunted as he lifted the weight off the bar and then set it down on the rest. 'We need to find a new supply of little four. The powder is good business.'

'Why don't we make a *gong-jou*, a peace agreement, with Louis Huu?'

'Never. It was Louis Huu gave my name to the yellow air.'

'Because you owe him money.'

'I do not get my powder, he does not get his money.'

Eddie lifted the bar from its rest, and the dragons on his biceps coiled back to life, and his cheeks puffed out with the strain. Ruby took a few steps into the room, stood over him at the bench.

'Saw Louis Huu yesterday.'

'Where?'

Cannot say Happy Valley, Ruby thought. He will know I have broken my promise. 'Peninsula Hotel. Go there to meet a friend. Louis Huu sees me, greets me like we are cousins. Then he whispers that he is going to kill you if you do not pay him for his powder.'

'Louis Huu is an old woman.'

'He frightens me.'

'Your own shadow frightens you, Ruby–ah.'

Quickly she put both her hands on the bar then took her feet from the floor, transferring her weight to the seventy kilograms Eddie was already holding. His eyes started in fear. Very satisfactory. He could not lower the bar to the stand because he could not hold the additional weight and the bar would fall across his throat. His arms were locked, straight up, and the agony of his muscles showed on his face. Sweat poured out of his skin like blood from a vein and dripped onto the floor.

'That why you are sending send me to Bangkok? Maybe he will kill me instead?'

He could only grunt, his cheeks puffed out, willing his arms not to bend . . . the little tuft of hair at her sex was just inches from his face. 'Going to get us all killed, Eddie–ah. Got a war with the Sun Yee On, you want to make us enemy of Louis Huu as well? Just pay him his money!'

He shook his head.

'You think you are so bloody big! Just bloody stupid!'

His whole body was shaking now, his stomach and chest muscles in spasm. She jumped off the bar and walked out of the room.

Eddie gasped, unable to bend his arms. The muscles had locked. He rolled his shoulders back and unlocked his fingers. The bar crashed to the floor. He groaned and lay for a long while on the bench, spreadeagled, panting with the pain of the torn muscles in his arms.

Little bitch.

Don't know why I love you so bad, Ruby–ah. You are just a thief and a gambler and a lying little bitch.

But you are *my* lying little bitch.

33

It had happened in Queens Plaza. At three o'clock in the afternoon, for God's sake. They must have known there would be fallout, Lacey thought. Someone, somewhere, had taken leave of their senses.

The backdrop for the disaster was a small diner called the New York Grill, a trendy deli that had become one of those places to see and be seen for middle-class Chinese and power-suited *gwailos*. The place was all chrome and fake marble, an idealised vision of Americana with a CD jukebox and a menu featuring malts and cheeseburgers. The staff wore Dodgers baseball caps and T-shirts.

It was also, Lacey knew, a favourite meeting place for middle-management lieutenants of the Sun Yee On. Which was why she assumed it had been targeted by two *mah jais* of the Wo Sing Wo. But this time someone had used guns.

Traffic was snarled back to Luard Road. A BMW was actually trying to nose its way through the onlookers on the pavement by pushing them aside with its front bumpers. An angry Chinese youth hammered on the car's bonnet with the flat of his hand. Lacey jumped out of her own Toyota and followed the chorus of car horns to the scene.

Already the entrance to the plaza had been cordoned off by motorcycle officers in lurid orange-and-yellow vision jackets. A crowd had gathered all along the glass frontage, shoving for a better view of the body.

A uniformed policeman who identified himself as Sergeant Yao Pau-fuk sketched the first details for her as they went up to the mezzanine on the escalator. Half an hour earlier two men had walked into the place and produced meat cleavers from their jackets, attacking one of the patrons.

The victim had drawn a firearm and his attackers had fled into the plaza. The man had unfortunately fired three shots after his assailants. One of them had hit a Caucasian woman in the head. She had died instantly.

'Witnesses?' Lacey said.

'The girl's friend,' the sergeant said. 'She is hysterical, we put her in a car, someone is with her, but she does not make any sense yet. Two others, Australians. But, you know, they said it all happened very fast.'

'What about the bar?'

'Just the staff. Everyone else run away.'

'They didn't see anything?' Lacey asked, hope triumphing over experience.

'All looking the other way. Or else they are in the kitchen.'

The girl lay sprawled on her stomach, her arms by her sides. Her glasses lay on the cold tile beside her. Miraculously, although the frame was bent, the lenses were still intact. Her lids were half-open, in the curious manner of the dead, as if she was merely half-asleep. A dark, malevolent pool had congealed around the head wound.

'Oh, Lord,' Lacey murmured. She had lost count of the bodies she had attended, but it still affected her. If it was a triad killing, she could remain dispassionate. Then she could tell herself it was just a job. But the young and the innocent still summoned these same feelings of rage and dismay.

She was barely out of her teens. She was wearing jeans and a day pack with a Union Jack sewn into the canvas. Lacey unzipped the bag; a Lonely Planet guidebook, a plastic bottle of drinking water, a chocolate bar, a tourist map of Hong Kong. No identification. She imagined that would be in a money belt. They would not find that until they had rolled the body, after the police photographers had recorded the scene.

But Lacey could guess what they would find; she was obviously a tourist, probably a backpacker, apparently British. A student, in all likelihood, staying at a dormitory hotel at Chungking Mansions. In Hong Kong less than a week, heading for Malaysia or Indonesia or Thailand or Australia. In the wrong place at the wrong time.

There was another zip pocket in the daypack. She opened it. There were two postcards, to addresses in Bournemouth and Oxford. One was addressed to a girl called Sandra. The other started 'Dear Mum and Dad'. Lacey swallowed down a burning in her throat. She copied the address in her notebook, reminded herself that she was helping no one if she did not keep her mind on the job.

A part of her said: now the pressure will be on. Even the triad bosses would not be happy about this.

So far they had murdered only their own. The newspapers and television displayed a morbid fascination for gang wars, but this was different. This was not murder, this was outrage, a crime that had to end with justice served. When the innocents were slain, when children and policemen and tourists were gunned down in the street, lines must be drawn.

She heard the wailing of a siren as the ambulance tried to get through. Lacey forced herself to get on with the job, to dispel the feelings of utter dismay that had settled on her. She took a notebook from her pocket and began to sketch the scene. Behind her, a policeman talked urgently into the hand mike of his radio car.

She heard shouting below her, in the foyer. Some press photographers were jostling the policemen assigned to keep them at bay.

'Keep those bastards back,' she said to Sergeant Yao.

One of the ambulance crew appeared at the top of the escalators. She signalled to him that there was nothing to be done. Like her, they would have to wait now for forensics and the police photographers before they could move the body.

The New York Grill took up a wide frontage between a jewellery store and an upmarket boutique selling French fashion. Three young Chinese waiters, their baseball caps trendily reversed, lounged at one of the fake marble tables. The manager, a young man in an Italian suit and white buttoned shirt with no tie, stood behind them. Two more uniformed police stood guard by the door.

Lacey nodded to them and went inside. The video screen had not been turned off. A group of shirtless black rappers

were posturing on a stage, their images ghostly in the daylight. Two of the staff members were watching. One of them pointed at the screen and laughed.

Lacey took out her identity wallet. 'Detective Inspector Madeleine Lacey. Serious Crimes Squad. Are you the manager?'

The man in the suit nodded. 'Kam Chun-kwan,' he said. His eyes were lidded and sullen.

'Did you see the shooting?' she asked him. She used Cantonese.

'I was in the kitchen,' he said 'I saw nothing.'

Lacey looked at the three staff. So did Kam. They all shook their heads, as they were supposed to do. One of them was holding a coaster, turning it over and over in his hands. Lacey noticed that he was the first to avert his eyes.

'What's your name?' Lacey said to him.

'Ma,' the boy said. 'Stevie Ma.'

She switched to English. 'Where were you when this happened, Stevie?'

He looked at Kam, then back at Lacey. 'I was making milk shakes,' he said, nodding towards the counter.

'You must have seen everything.'

Stevie shook his head. 'I was looking the other way. I had to make five malts.'

It was an incredible answer, but Lacey knew from experience that she could badger Stevie Ma all day for the obvious flaws in his story without reward.

'This is not good for business,' Kam said.

'Well, naturally, that is our major concern,' Lacey said, bitterly. 'There is a young girl dead outside, but all we are worried about is your business.'

But Kam had made a point; although the target of the hit had apparently escaped, the assassins had still succeeded in hurting a significant triad business. There would be retribution for that. Within days there would be another body on the street.

Somehow the police department had to stop this, before more innocent people got hurt.

An angry shout from the doorway. Lacey whirled around. One of the press photographers had somehow managed to find a way into the plaza and was standing over the dead girl's body, taking close-up pictures. As she watched he bent down and parted the girl's hair, in order to get a better shot of the head wound.

Lacey reacted faster than even the uniformed policeman who had shouted the warning. She ran outside and hit the photographer running, wrenching the camera from his grasp with her right hand and with the other twisting his arm behind him, pushing him away from the scene.

The photographer had not seen her coming, and he shouted out in dismay when he heard his expensive camera bouncing on the tiles.

But Lacey was not finished. Twisting his arm higher between his shoulder blades she pushed him against the chrome rail overlooking the foyer. She grabbed a handful of his hair, twisting his head back.

'You fucking ghoul,' she hissed in his ear.

Sergeant Yao ran across, and stood beside her. He looked bewildered. 'We are arresting him?' he said.

Lacey sensed, rather than heard, the cameras whirring below. She knew she had made a dreadful mistake. 'Just get him out of here,' she screamed.

'You fucking pay for my camera!' the man screamed at her, as soon as she released her grip on him.

'Get him out of here!'

'I will sue you!'

Sergeant Yao frog-marched the man back down the escalator, where his colleagues were fighting each other in a pack to faithfully record the incident.

Lacey turned around to find Tyler staring at her. He had just arrived in time to witness this little piece of theatre. He took her arm and guided her away from view. 'What the hell's going on?'

'I lost it for a moment,' Lacey said, under her breath.

'You don't ever lose it at all,' he hissed. 'Not ever.' He looked down at the faces of the journalists, recognised the looks of triumph. 'Get ready to be famous.' He looked at the

body of the girl on the tiles. 'Jesus. The rocket's going up on this one.'

The girl's sightless eyes stared over the echoing expanses of fake marble, looking for explanation.

34

The murder of a young British student called Barbara Warhurst was the lead story on the front page of next morning's *South China Morning Post*. Lacey's brush with the photographer was also given prominence, and grainy images of her pushing the man over the chrome and glass railing of the mezzanine floor featured on page three. As Lacey arrived at her office the next morning – haggard and irritable after less than four hours sleep – she was greeted with ironic cheers.

'Way to go, killer,' one of her fellow inspectors grinned as she walked past his office.

Someone had tacked a handwritten sign on her office door: NO CAMERAS BEYOND THIS POINT. Underneath was a copy of the photograph torn from the *South China Morning Post*. Someone had scrawled a caption in biro:

'I TOLD YOU NO PHOTOGRAPHS
UNTIL I POWDERED MY FACE.'

Lacey ripped it off and went in. There were flowers sitting on the desk, chrysanthemums and jonquils, a card attached. Lacey tore open the envelope.

'Don't let the bastards grind you down. John.'

Tyler appeared in the doorway. He shambled in with a pile of newspapers, saw the flowers and raised an eyebrow. 'Not good for your image, Lace. After I read the paper this morning I thought you were tough.'

'It's from the photographer. He liked it so much he wants me to do it to him again.'

'Yeah, well some guys are like that.' He threw the newspaper on her desk. 'I told you you were going to be famous.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't apologise to me. There'll be probably be an internal investigation. You can do your grovelling to the Deputy Commissioner. Cheer up, Lace. I'll look after you. You'll probably just get a whack on the bottom with a cane. You might enjoy it.'

'That sounds like sexual harassment.'

Tyler held up his hands in mock horror. 'I wouldn't dare. So what have we got, Lace?'

'The manager of the New York Grill is a man by the name of Kam Chun-kwan. I've checked with records. He has one conviction, three years for assault. He's now believed to be an office bearer with the Sun Yee On.'

'He didn't see anything.'

'Right. Neither did his boys. Three staff working, they were all in the kitchen or making milk shakes.'

'Milk shakes,' Tyler said, and he looked out of the window, his mind elsewhere for the moment. 'We don't even get to work exotic cases any more, Lace. No more meat cleavers and noodles. Now it's pistols and milk shakes. It's like Hill Street Blues, for Christ's sake.'

'Ballistics say the bullets were 7.62 calibre, probably fired from Chinese-made type 54s.'

'Black Stars.'

'Yes.'

'How many casings did you find?'

'Three. One bullet lodged in the wall a hundred metres away. One recovered from the dead woman.'

'That leaves one. You've checked all the hospitals?'

'Every hospital, clinic, every registered doctor on the island, Kowloon and the Territories. I've got a squad of uniforms still combing the plaza for the missing bullet.'

'We have to have a conviction on this one, quick,' Tyler said. 'I think it's time we put some pressure on the boys.' He looked at his watch. 'Eight o'clock too early to go to a bar?'

Lacey smiled. 'Not for me.'

Tyler drove through Wanchai, past unlit neon signs advertising establishments with names like Hotlips and Miami Vice.

The girls employed in the bars were mainly Filipinas on six-month visas. The Suzie Wongs of Hong Kong had long ago got themselves well-paid jobs in banks and travel agencies.

They stopped on Lockhart Road. 'The Harbour Club,' Lacey said, reading the unlit neon sign. Rain poured from an awning and splashed into the street outside the entrance. Nightclubs had the romance of a hangover in the grey light of mornings, Lacey thought, and all the lure of remorse. The black painted door was locked.

'I'm sure it looks better at night.'

'Wouldn't know.'

There was a black 450 SEL parked in the alley beside the entrance. A truck had backed in, and two young men were unloading crates of liquor off the back. As Lacey and Tyler watched another truck pulled up in front of the entrance. It was painted midnight blue, and three young Chinese in police overalls jumped out.

'Let's make someone's day,' Tyler said.

They ran down the alley. Lacey felt a shock of cold water from the leaking awning find its way between her raincoat and her skin. She followed Tyler past the astonished delivery boys and through the open back door of the club.

A young Chinese was behind the bar, counting the money in the cash register as he talked into the telephone, the handpiece tucked into his right shoulder. He wore a black leather jacket and a yellow silk shirt with a black silk tie. Lacey noted the belt pager and a Cartier tank wristwatch.

He recognised them immediately and his face betrayed his consternation. He quickly finished the phone call.

'Hello Daniel,' Tyler said. 'This is Detective Inspector Lacey. Lace, this is Daniel Chen.'

Chen nodded at Lacey, and his initial confusion was hidden now behind an ingratiating smile. 'What can I do for you?'

Lacey looked around, saw her reflection mirrored back to her from the walls and the false columns. She could smell stale sweat and liquor.

Tyler reached into his jacket pocket and produced a brown manila envelope. He handed it to him. 'Sorry,' he said.

Chen saw the three uniformed policemen walk into the club and his lips set in a tight, thin line. He tore open the envelope and read the non-compliance order. 'What is this?'

'This establishment does not comply with Hong Kong fire regulations, as set out in the code. It gives us authority to confiscate all stock on the premises. Further, you are hereby required to cease trading until all modifications have been carried out.'

He tossed the order casually aside. 'How much?' he said softly.

Tyler shook his head. 'That's not what this is about, Daniel.'

'This is bullshit.'

'This is strict enforcement of the law,' Lacey said. She nodded to the uniformed police sergeant. He turned and shouted an order at his two men. From the back room she heard the clinking of bottles as the police carried out the cases of whisky that had just been delivered.

A middle-aged Cantonese woman came out of the office behind the bar. She was the mama-san, she kept a check on the girls at night and stood guard over the cash register. 'What are these pieces of dog's business doing here?' she said to Chen in Cantonese.

'Putting the skids under you, grandmother,' Lacey said to her. The woman had not expected either of the police to understand the dialect and her face set like concrete.

'What is this about?' Chen said.

'It's about to drive you out of business, Daniel. We don't want to do this. But recent events have forced our hand.'

'Certain people will be seriously unhappy when they hear about this. Will lay an official complaint at very highest level.'

Tyler gave him his best smile. 'I think you'll find the highest levels are out of their office for the next few days.'

Daniel Chen pushed past the mama-san and into the back office. They heard him whispering urgently into a telephone. 'I wonder who the certain seriously unhappy people might be,' Tyler said.

'You think you'll get a phone call from Timothy Man?'

'Now why would one of Hong Kong's most notable citizens want to talk to a humble chief inspector like me?'

The three police were still loading crates onto the police truck. 'Going to be a good Christmas party this year,' Tyler said, and winked at the mama-san.

'You're enjoying this,' Lacey said.

'In a perverse way. In my more reflective moments I fantasise about being a priest.'

Chen had finished his phone call. He came out of the back office. 'Cannot do this,' he said.

'It's the law, Daniel.'

'You make a lot of trouble for yourself.'

Tyler flushed, the tiny capillaries in his cheeks suddenly livid against his skin. But it was the only clue to the depth of his anger. When he spoke his voice remained even. 'I want you to give a message to Timothy Man.'

'Do not know anyone of this name.'

Tyler ignored the protest. 'Tell him that a British tourist was shot in Queens Plaza yesterday.'

'Do not know anything about this.'

'No, I know you don't. It's not personal, Daniel.' The three uniformed police had finished loading the truck. Tyler signalled the sergeant. 'Now you can start ripping out the air conditioners,' he said.

Ruby Tour was on the first floor of a nondescript seven-storey building in a lane off Queens Road West. Eddie parked the Porsche on the kerb behind Ruby's red BMW. He threw open the door and slammed it. A leaky air conditioner dripped warm water into the alley from above.

He ran inside the building, and up the stairs, which were badly lit and smelled of mould. A brown-painted door had a hand-written sign: Ruby Tour.

He kicked it open.

The office was small and functional. The room had been divided with free-standing partitioning, of a type often used in government offices. Travel posters had been tacked on the walls. A very young Chinese girl sat behind a heavy metal reception desk reading *Sister's Pictorial*. She had a

plastic hair clip and horn-rimmed glasses and a bad skin problem.

She looked up at Eddie and her jaw fell open. He walked right past her and kicked over the partitioning behind her desk. She screamed.

Ruby was at her desk, talking into the telephone while she studied the computer screen in front of her. When she saw Eddie she immediately slammed the receiver on its cradle. 'Eddie-ah. What is wrong?'

He picked up the computer monitor and threw it across the room. 'What happened to my seven hundred thousand?'

Ruby's receptionist was standing among the wreckage of the partitioning. 'Get out. Go!' Ruby shouted at her.

The girl fled.

Ruby looked up at Eddie. 'I will pay it back to you, heya. Don't get so mad, okay?'

'You promise me, Ruby-ah! You promise me no more horses, no more trips to Macao! How can you lose seven hundred thousand so fast?'

Just simple, Ruby thought. Just have to lose big a few times. Eddie was standing over her, fists clenched at his sides. She would not stand up, would not let him see she was frightened. She reached for her cigarettes. No trembling in her hands. That was good.

Eddie grabbed the pack of Dunhill from her fingers and crushed them in his fist. 'How will you pay back seven hundred thousand, Ruby-ah?'

'Find a way.'

The slap took her by surprise. A flash of white light and suddenly she was lying on her side on the carpet. There was ringing in her ears and the salty taste of her own blood in her mouth.

'You got chicken porridge for brains, Ruby-ah! Seven hundred thousand!'

He kicked her in the stomach. Ruby screamed and rolled away from him, frightened now. Eddie never hit her, never. She tried to stand up, but the room was spinning, and she could not get her balance.

He was standing over her again, his fist raised. She

screamed and tried to cover her head with her hands. She waited for the blow, but it never came. Suddenly he was kneeling beside her, his hands gripping her shoulders.

When she dared to look at him again, he was crying. 'Ruby-ah,' he moaned.

'Just a stupid little flower,' she whispered. 'I am so sorry.'

'How can you lose so much?' He reached out, wiped the blood of her lip with his thumb, licked it away. 'You make me hurt you, Ruby-ah.'

'Love you too much, Eddie-ah,' she whispered, in English. 'Just a stupid little sister. So sorry.' He put his arms around her. She heard his heartbeat through his shirt. Her blood on the silk. 'Peter Mui told you,' she said.

'Of course Peter Mui! Peter Mui is my ghost inside the Sun Yee On.'

Ruby curled into him, like a wounded child, felt his arms hold her even tighter. Peter Mui! Peter Mui was the rotting turd of a leper. She had promised she would pay off the debt, instead he had whispered her secrets to Eddie. Maybe time to make him pay, no shit.

'Don't be mad at me, Eddie-ah. Never do this again. Never make you angry with me ever.'

He rocked her on his knee like a child, among the wreckage of her office. Above her head a man sat in a hospital bed, his leg encased in plaster. It was a poster advertising travel insurance. One corner of the poster had been torn and now hung limp.

Perhaps omen here for me, Ruby thought. Perhaps I need insurance against Eddie Lau.

35

The phone rang on Keelan's desk. It was McReadie. 'Might have something for you', he said. 'Meet me in Delaney's in half an hour.'

McReadie was waiting in a booth in the far corner. When he saw Keelan he went to the bar and ordered a Carlsberg and another Scotch for himself.

'You know Ruby, of course,' he said, when they returned to the booth.

She was nursing a Coke, checking her reflection in a compact mirror. As usual she had dressed down, black boots and a black Ferragamo leather jacket complete with silver chains. She had her legs crossed, revealing a lot of thigh below the short leather skirt.

Keelan was immediately on guard. The details of their last meeting were etched on his memory. 'Ruby,' he said.

Ruby raised an eyebrow. 'Kee Lan,' she said. 'Still think I look like a short-time girl?'

Yep, Keelan thought. 'I apologise for our misunderstanding that evening.' Her drink was warm. 'Like another Coke?'

Ruby made a face. 'Rather drink duck urine.' She returned her attention to her compact mirror.

McReadie swallowed half of his Scotch. 'This is just an informal meeting, John. Ruby is a little nervous about being seen with us.'

'I understand.'

'You understand shit,' Ruby said.

Keelan looked at McReadie.

'As you know, Ruby has been of help to us in the past,' McReadie said. 'Now she thinks she might be able to help you with the American end of things.'

'Oh?'

Ruby took her cigarette from the ashtray and drew on it. 'Maybe get information for you, okay? Help you get number four heroin in US. No shit'.

'How would you come by this sort of information?'

Ruby looked at McReadie as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. She blew a stream of cigarette smoke towards the ceiling.

'Okay. Let's start at the beginning Ruby.' Keelan turned over one of the coasters and pushed it across the bar. 'Can you write your name for me. Chinese characters.'

'Why you need my name, okay?'

'It's the policy of my agency that anyone who offers to become a confidential informant has their identity properly established. We have to take fingerprints . . .'

'*Yau moh gau chor!* Think I'm crazy? Care for my life, okay. Triad find out they chop me dead finish, no shit.'

'Your triad is not going to find out through us.'

'How can Ruby know for sure, okay? Got a lot of mosquito in a room, how you know which one bite you, heya?'

Keelan looked at McReadie, who just shrugged.

'Here to do you good deal, okay?' Ruby said. 'Help you get big heroin bust. No name, no fingerprint. Ruby don't want to wake up tomorrow dead.'

Keelan tossed the coaster across the table. From experience he knew that informants came to the agency for only two reasons; greed or revenge. He wondered to which category she belonged. She seemed eminently capable of both emotions.

'If you want to work for us, I have to be sure I can trust you,' Keelan said.

'I told you this, Ruby,' McReadie said.

Ruby stubbed out her cigarette and leaned across the table. 'Think I'm stupid, fucking your mother?' she hissed at him.

Keelan shook his head. 'No, I don't think that.'

She leaned closer. 'Got to explain how this works, heya? If I tell you about powder, what you do for me, heya?'

'We have a Witness Protection programme.'

'What sort of protection?'

Keelan sighed. 'If the information is worthwhile, and leads to the prosecution of major traffickers, we can provide you with a new identity, relocate you to some part of the United States where you will be safe from reprisals.'

'Big house, security camera, bodyguard? That shit?'

'We can't go that far.'

'How much money you pay me, okay?'

'The United States government does not provide us with a great deal of funds for that purpose, Ruby.'

For the first time she looked less sure of herself.

McReadie looked at Keelan. 'I told her this, John. She didn't believe me.'

'Got to be crazy. I can get you big bust, American.'

'We'd certainly be very grateful for any kind of information you can provide.'

'How much you pay, heya?'

'If you were to agree to become a confidential informant for the United States Government I could perhaps authorise a monthly payment of five thousand US dollars . . .'

'Would not break wind in your soup for five thousand dollar.'

This lady has a wonderful way of expressing herself, Keelan thought. 'I'm sorry you feel that way.'

McReadie picked up the glasses on the table. 'I'll get some more drinks.'

When McReadie was gone Ruby's manner changed abruptly. She rested her chin on her hand and ran a scarlet fingernail along Keelan's wrist. 'You are very handsome guy,' she said.

Keelan did not believe his ears. Jesus. He'd never been propositioned by an informant before. 'Thank you, Ruby,' he said, deadpan.

She touched the ring on his finger. 'You married, Kee Lan?'

'Yeah, married.'

'Your wife in Hong Kong?'

He shook his head.

'Maybe you like to take me to dinner, okay. Like hot food, lot of chilli. You like hot, heya?'

Her fingernail made tiny circles on the flesh on the back of his wrist. He snatched his hand away and leaned across the table. 'What is it you really want, Ruby?'

The question seemed to surprise her. 'Just want a very fun life, okay. Like everybody.'

'You got a fun life now?'

Ruby looked confused. She frowned and fumbled in her bag for her cigarettes. Keelan noticed the slight swelling around her lip, a small cut almost hidden by the cherry-coloured lip gloss she wore. She was a close associate of Eddie Lau's, McReadie had told him. How close, I wonder?

Ruby lit her cigarette and blew the smoke towards the ceiling. 'Can help you very much, okay.'

'Why don't I trust you, Ruby?'

'Don't know why you don't trust. Maybe you got a problem, no shit.'

'What is it you really want?'

'Want to help you. Don't want to do no more dirty drugs business, okay.'

'No, that's not it.'

She was pouting now, getting mad.

'Tell me what you really want, and I'll tell you if we can help you.'

She stood up. 'Waste my time, heya!' she said, as if he was a car dealer and he had turned down a perfectly reasonable offer on a new car.

'You better take this,' Keelan said. He gave her his card. It had his mobile and fax numbers on it. 'If you change your mind, or if . . . something comes up . . . maybe give me a call.'

Ruby glanced at the card, then ripped it up and left the pieces lying on the carpet.

McReadie came back with three drinks. He stared at Ruby's delectable behind in its black leather skirt as she flounced out through the door. 'Oh, you charmer,' he said to Keelan.

'She had a hidden agenda.'

'Sure she did. You could still have played footsie a bit longer. With Ruby, you have to read between the lines a little.'

'She was wasting our time.'

McReadie sat down, shaking his head. 'I don't know what it is with you and women. You could have humoured her a little.' He looked at his watch. 'Almost time for lunch. Man cannot live by drink alone.'

'Sometimes I think it's worth a try,' Keelan said.

Ruby drove in a blind and fearful fury, her hand pressed on the car horn, her frustrations compounding in the traffic. Her debt to Peter Mui was still unpaid and Eddie was still mad at her. All she had been trying to do was win back the money Henry Pi had stolen from her. May his ancestors scream in endless torture in the otherworld and may his children turn into pi-dogs and dig up his bones! Just not fair. If not for Martin Fong being so greedy she would have seven figures in a bank in Taiwan, have more red notes than a cat has hairs! She felt as if she was running through quicksand, every step taking her deeper into the swamp.

So much for Americans, so much for insurance. This Kee Lan was the rump-sniffing son of a leper.

That morning she had consulted the T'ung Shu and she had divined that it was a bad day to make new babies or to polish an ancestor's bones but it was an auspicious day for juggling new business enterprises. The day's lucky number was three. She decided she would try her luck in the fan tan parlour off Hollywood Road.

She would bet with the money The Ox had given her for telling him the name of the ghost inside the Sun Yee On.

McReadie took Keelan to lunch at the Press Club on Lockhart Street in Wanchai. The Club was on the third floor; the fourth floor was a brothel.

It was an L-shaped room, a bar on one side, the far wall filled with mounted press photographs; Michael Chang, burning refugee huts from the late sixties, a crashed CAAC airliner half submerged in the harbour, a black-and-white portrait of Mao Tse Tung. The bar had a friendly if dilapidated atmosphere, stranded in time from the seventies.

McReadie found a table below a mounted poster of two

bare-breasted Polynesian girls. He ordered the day's special for Keelan and himself, roast beef with potatoes and something he called Yorkshire pudding. Keelan braced himself.

McReadie returned from the bar with two Carlsbergs. 'Sorry,' he said.

'Sorry?'

'About the thing with Ruby. I told her you couldn't make her a millionaire overnight, but she insisted on talking to you. In some ways she's a very smart girl. But in others she's very naive.'

'How long have you known her?'

'Long enough. She's one of life's mercenaries, John. Her bottom line is money. But she was born and raised in Hong Kong. What do you expect?'

'You trust her?'

'Of course not.'

'So what about this information she claims to have?'

'Remember that trawler we impounded a few weeks ago carrying two hundred kilos of number four? The tip-off came from Ruby. So, maybe she's telling the truth. Or maybe she just needs money and she's made the whole thing up. Who knows?'

'I handled it badly,' he said.

'As I said, it wouldn't have hurt to have sweet-talked her a little. But if it's money she wanted, and you don't have the kind of money she's looking for, the result would still have been the same.'

Their lunches arrived. Keelan prodded the Yorkshire pudding as if it was an unidentified fungus.

McReadie shovelled his into his mouth with some roast beef. 'By the way,' he said, 'have you seen my wee niece lately?'

Keelan smiled. So this was the real reason for the lunch. 'Bumped into her in the lift the other day. Did she tell you?'

'She did nae mention it to me. She's a dark horse, that one.'

'What's this all about, Mac? Are you checking me out to see if my intentions are honourable?'

McReadie laughed, but his eyes were hard. 'What she does

on her own time is her business. But I am very fond of her. Been more of a father to her, in many ways, than her own dad. He was a bastard, that one, and I say that as a good friend.'

'What do his enemies say about him?'

'If you want to know what his enemies said about him you just have to read the transcripts of the trial in 1975. I'm sure you'll find some copies at the ICAC.'

'She mentioned he'd had a few problems towards the end of his career.'

'Aye well, you'd better be careful what you say around her. Young Madeleine's always been a little prickly. But she's a marshmallow, once you get to know her.'

'Ever thought of starting a dating agency?' Keelan said.

McReadie ignored him. 'She had four older brothers and her father was a chief superintendent in the police. A lot of heavy role models. If she hadn't been such a hard nose from birth she would have ended up in a convent.'

'Mac.'

'Yes, John?'

'Can we change the subject?'

'Aye, maybe we should. Here she comes now.'

Lacey stopped halfway to the table, frowned in McReadie's direction. He grinned at her and jumped to his feet. 'I'll get some more drinks,' he said.

'My buy,' Keelan said.

'Your money's no good in here. You're not a member. You have to have a number to buy a drink.'

'Can't I get a drink without a number?'

'You can, but it would cost you twice as much.'

He went to the bar.

Lacey took her bag off her shoulder and sat down. She looked bone weary, and there were plum-coloured bruises under her eyes. 'What are you doing here?' she said.

'Mac invited me.'

'Did he tell you I come here for lunch every Friday?'

'He must have forgot.'

Lacey looked embarrassed. 'Set up,' she murmured.

Keelan looked over her shoulder, studied the mounted photographs on the wall. A group of police in Kevlar vests and

riot gear waded through a swamp. A group of Chinese police fought to keep back what seemed to be a very small number of protesters and a very large number of press photographers. A policeman trying to persuade a potential suicide to come down off the roof.

'You'll be up there any day,' Keelan said, over the strained silence. 'They must have got themselves some real dandies of you bending that newspaper guy's ass over the rail.'

'I suppose you would have handled it differently.'

Keelan caught the hard edge to her voice and retreated. 'No, I wouldn't. If it makes any difference I think I would have done the same.'

'I was charged with bringing the department into disrepute.'

'Not fair.'

'Life isn't fair.'

'By the way . . . thanks for dinner the other night.'

'Don't mention it.'

She was cool. The defences were up again.

'Thanks for the flowers,' she said.

'No problem. They were growing on the balcony next door. I just leaned over with a pair of scissors.'

She did not smile. 'Been a week. Why didn't you call me?'

'It's a long story.'

McReadie returned from the bar with three beers. At that moment his belt pager summoned him. He checked the message on the display. 'Duty calls,' he said, and went to the phone on the bar.

'I'm really not worth the effort,' Keelan said.

'I came to the same conclusion.'

Keelan concentrated on his lunch. He pushed the Yorkshire pudding to the side of his plate. 'Will you tell me something? Be as brutally frank as you like.'

Lacey stared at him, hard. 'What do you want to know?'

Keelan tapped the Yorkshire pudding. 'Is this, or has this ever been, alive?'

She smiled. 'It's just dough and water. Like a dumpling.'

'Great.' He looked up. 'Do you know any place that doesn't serve Yorkshire pudding for lunch?'

'Perhaps. Why?'

'Will you go there with me one day?'

Lacey did not answer him straight away. McReadie came back a few moments later and the conversation drifted to other things. She left with McReadie half an hour later and she still had not given Keelan an answer.

He supposed she would wait for him to call.

36

A supposedly satirical cartoon of Sir Timothy Man had defined his position in Hong Kong society when he first rose to public prominence eight years before, after gaining a majority holding in South China Marine Holdings; it showed him sipping champagne, the pockets of his tuxedo crammed with paper from some of Hong Kong's leading companies. The caption underneath read: He came, he saw, he cocktailed.

There was mystery about his past, but Timothy Man's present was well documented in the *South China Morning Post* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. He had interests in property, shipping and insurance, with a 55 per cent share in Dragon Life and General, one of the largest insurance companies in Asia. He owned three hundred taxis, five tour companies, three car hire firms, and seven travel agencies. He had investments in hotels in Los Angeles and San Francisco, and had recently unveiled a scheme to become Hong Kong's next airline operator.

There was mystery about his birthplace, even his date of birth, and the origins of the capital that had launched him on his mercurial rise were even more obscure. Rumours suggested the money had come from Beijing, or even that it was Marcos money. Lacey had once seen a classified police dossier that suggested it was actually laundered drug funds from Burma.

What was not disputed was that he had what the Chinese called *guanxi* – the right connections. He was a familiar of Li Peng, the Chinese strongman, and of the Suhartos in Indonesia.

He was a strong family man, like many Chinese, and spent millions every year on charities, with the happy consequence of earning merit for the afterlife and a knighthood from the Queen at the same time. For Sir Timothy, philanthropy was

big business; in the last three years he had financed the construction of schools and hospitals in Guanzhou, in mainland China. It would undoubtedly count in his favour when Hong Kong became Xiang Gang in 1997.

He owned a villa on Bluff Path on the Peak, and a summer house at Ting Kao overlooking the eleven-and-a-half-mile beach. He claimed to have attended Oxford University, and when in an expansive mood he liked to talk about balls he had attended there, speaking affectionately of English rural life.

But the true measure of the man, in Lacey's opinion, was that his office was said to have only one chair.

Tyler had been expecting him. Many of the establishments he and Lacey had closed down in the last twenty-four hours were known to be owned and operated by Sir Timothy Man. Not that anyone had ever proved it; all the licences were held by dummy companies. Sir Timothy himself operated out of an office in the Landmark building, the most prestigious address in Hong Kong, as befitted one of Hong Kong's premier citizens.

He appeared at the Wanchai police station at three o'clock that afternoon. Tyler wandered into Lacey's office with a polystyrene cup of black coffee and a stupid grin. 'Want to meet a celebrity?'

'Kevin Costner?' Lacey said, brightly.

'Not as tall.'

'Danny de Vito.'

'Not as good looking.'

'Now you've really got me hot.'

'Sir Timothy Man.'

'He's in your office?'

'Looks like a swan in a duck farm. He keeps looking round for someone to come and clean out the ashtrays and pour him a glass of champagne. Come in and I'll introduce you.'

Sir Timothy wore a grey blazer with charcoal trousers, over a soft pink shirt with a button-down collar and grey silk tie. A diamond glittered on the little finger of his left hand. There were more diamonds on his wristwatch, his tie pin and the

buckle of his crocodile skin belt. Lacey smelled his cologne from outside the room. He sat with his legs crossed, perfectly at ease, his Italian leather shoes slick as smoked glass.

'Sir Timothy, this is a colleague of mine, Detective Inspector Madeleine Lacey. Madeleine, allow me to introduce Sir Timothy Man.'

Sir Timothy smiled but did not stand up. Lacey instantly felt invisible. It seemed women detectives did not exist in his sphere. It appeared that it was discomfort enough having to sit in a working detective's office; being introduced to such a man's subordinates was just too much.

Tyler gave Lacey an encouraging smile and pulled up a chair for her. She sat down. She hated her boss's office. It stank of other people's stale cigarettes, and there were coffee cup rings on the polished surface. Papers had been sorted into random piles. It offended her own sense of order.

'Can I get you a cup of coffee?' Tyler said to Sir Timothy. His face was deadpan, but Lacey could tell he was enjoying himself hugely. For once the boys upstairs had not returned Sir Timothy's calls, and Tyler himself was in the driving seat. Where he had always wanted to be.

Sir Timothy glanced at the polystyrene cup and his nose wrinkled at the bitter stench of bad instant coffee. 'No thank you, Chief Inspector,' he said carefully.

Lacey studied him more closely. His face was bland, a shiny surface from which nothing was reflected. He had a broad moon face, with a smile permanently frozen into place, and a high forehead, the black hair brushed straight back. He wore spectacles, which reflected the fluorescent lights and hid the expression in his eyes. His face was mottled, darker patches of skin against ivory. Liver condition perhaps, Lacey guessed.

Tyler put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his cracked leatherette. It creaked at the shifting of his weight.

'How can we help you, Sir Timothy?'

'I have not come here for myself.'

Tyler smiled at Lacey.

'This morning I was contacted by some associates of mine who have business interests in Wanchai. They are very

concerned about certain recent events. They have asked me to represent them in this matter.'

'To which recent events are you referring, Sir Timothy?' Tyler said, looking genuinely puzzled.

'In the last two days it seems your police officers have forced the closure of three cocktail bars and five restaurants in the Wanchai area.'

'Cocktail bars?' Tyler said. He made a great show of fumbling for his spectacles. He opened a manila file on the desk in front of him. 'Let me see. According to our files they were not quite cocktail bars, by the exact definition, anyway. If I may be so indelicate, girls have been seen dancing there in their underwear.'

Sir Timothy Man crossed and re-crossed his legs. 'For myself I do not approve of this sort of thing.'

'Nor do I,' Tyler said.

'Of course. But we are men of the world, Chief Inspector.'

Tyler looked over the top of his half-moon lenses at Lacey. 'With certain exceptions.'

Sir Timothy looked at Lacey, flustered by her inclusion in this conversation. 'What I mean, Chief Inspector, is that we all know this sort of thing goes on. But regardless of personal feelings, one must consider that what you have done effects even greater harm. Many people derive their employment in such places. How are people to live if the police take away their livelihood at a whim?'

'Well, this was not what I would characterise as a whim, Sir Timothy.'

'Then what would you call it?'

Tyler looked confused by the question. 'The law,' he said.

Sir Timothy ignored this. 'Some of these women have young children, Chief Inspector. Can you sleep tonight knowing that children are going to bed hungry?'

Tyler nodded his head to acknowledge the perspicacity of this argument. 'I'd certainly like to rectify the situation. If I could. At the moment there is little I can do. My hands are tied, as it were. The law, as they say, is the law.'

'Can you suggest some way we can resolve the matter?'

Tyler sat forward and appeared to think very deeply about this. 'Can you assure me you have no financial interest in any of these businesses, Sir Timothy?'

'Of course not,' he snapped.

'It is just that you appear very anxious over a matter that is surely of little concern to you.'

'I have been asked to represent these businessmen in this matter, that is all. It would appear to me that an injustice has been done.'

'Indeed.' Tyler looked at Lacey. 'Inspector Lacey, Sir Timothy has posed an interesting question. Have you any suggestions how we might be able to help him?'

Lacey leaned towards Sir Timothy, who did not even turn in his seat to look at her. 'You see, Sir Timothy, three weeks ago a man was attacked and murdered in a particularly vicious manner in a mah-jongg parlour in Jaffe Road. The incident took place, coincidentally, above one of the restaurants we were recently forced to shut down. Then three days ago there was another assault in a premises known as the New York Grill in Queens Plaza. In this instance shots were fired. Unfortunately a young British tourist was hit by a stray bullet. She was fatally wounded.'

'That is most unfortunate,' Timothy Man said, his attention still focused on Tyler.

'Well certainly for her. And for the family.' Fat little bastard, Lacey thought. 'These two incidents have had unfortunate repercussions. Our superiors feel we have been too lenient on enforcing the letter of the law in this area, and they have asked us to be more diligent. And so we have been forced to police certain problems that we might previously have overlooked.'

'You cannot make scapegoats of honest businessmen because you cannot do your job and catch the persons responsible for these two assaults,' he said, still looking at Tyler.

Lacey felt a flush of anger but Tyler raised one finger from the desk in warning. He picked up the conversation, his manner still gruff but amiable. 'Of course we can,' he said. 'We did. We have.'

'It seems we have nothing to fear from the Chinese in 1997. We already have a police state.'

Tyler affected a chuckle. 'That seems a little harsh, Sir Timothy.'

'As a member of the local business community you have my assurance that we will do all we can to help bring any criminal to justice. Even though we are being innocently punished.'

'That is not quite the way we see it.'

Sir Timothy studied his expensive shirt-cuffs and stared pointedly at his watch. 'I have another meeting,' he said.

'Detective Lacey will show you out,' Tyler said.

Sir Timothy rose to his feet. His manner became suddenly conciliatory. 'Tell me, Chief Inspector, should you find the person responsible for these outrageous crimes, would your superiors then find it less reasonable to harass members of the local business community?'

'I am sure we would not be under such pressure to read the letter of the law so exactly.'

'Thank you for your time.' He turned to Lacey and addressed her directly for the first time. 'I know my way around this building perfectly well,' he said, and walked out.

Lacey and Tyler looked at each other.

'Lovely chap,' Tyler said. 'Anyway, I think we've stirred the sewer, Lace. Now we'll see what floats to the top.'

37

Kennedy Town

Keelan found the dim sum house, only with great difficulty, in a six-storey building near the harbour. The restaurant shared the third floor with a rice merchant and an ivory carver making chops and mah-jongg tiles. There was a sign on the stairs for a fortune teller on the next floor.

Lacey was waiting for him at a table by the open window, facing onto the untidy hubbub of the street. She was wearing jeans and a pink jumper, and her hair was tied back in a braid. She was the only European in the restaurant, and also the only woman. A Chinese language newspaper was open in front of her.

She waved to him as he entered. 'You found the place all right?' she said, as he sat down opposite her on the wooden bench seat.

'I've been wandering around for half an hour.'

'Well, you're here now.' She poured some hot green tea into a small porcelain cup and passed it to him. He nodded at the newspaper. 'You can read Mandarin?'

'I pretend. A few characters. I speak Cantonese and a smattering of *putonghua*. My amah taught me when I was a child. Dad insisted.'

'I'm impressed.'

'Really? I didn't think anything impressed a Californian except an earthquake.'

Keelan let that go. He looked around. The customers were all Chinese, young men in jeans and pullovers to grandfathers in shiny black pants and old tweed jackets. They smoked and drank tea and read the *Jockey Daily News*. There was a rail hanging along the wall next to the window where the old men

hung the wooden cages of their pet finches and parakeets. Stainless steel spittoons were placed strategically around the tiled floor.

Some of the customers were clustered around the television in the corner, talking and laughing against the background of sickly Cantonese music. Once again Keelan was impressed by how noise did not seem to bother the Chinese; they were at home with it.

A waitress pushed a dim sum cart from the kitchen. Lacey chose three bamboo baskets and pushed a bowl and chopsticks towards Keelan.

'You've eaten dim sum before?'

'I'm from San Francisco. It's like asking an Italian if they've ever eaten pasta.'

'It's just that you look like a McDonald's sort of person.'

'Why do I hang out with you? All you ever do is insult me.' Today he had made a special effort. He had visited a barber's for a shave with a cut throat razor, and had had his shirt and jeans washed and pressed at a laundry. Not a hair out of place. He noticed she was wearing lip gloss, and there was a hint of perfume. He felt the gnawing of excitement in his belly.

'Why *do* you hang out with me?' she asked, looking at him frankly.

'Hey, I just want to get you in the sack.'

It was meant to be a joke, but she didn't smile. 'Apart from that.'

'I was kidding.'

'I hope not. I'm not a school girl.'

She was leaning towards him, and he was aware of a trace of scent and her warmth. 'I have a confession. The first time I met you, I told your uncle I thought you had a plum shoved up your ass.'

'I wasn't fond of you either. Why do you smoke?'

'Bad habit I picked up. Nerves.'

'What are you nervous about?'

'You mean right now?'

She smiled at that. 'Anyway. You finally called me. What took you so long?'

'I don't know how to say this.'

She offered him some of her shrimp with her chopsticks. 'Try.'

He chewed slowly, reflecting. A turmoil of opposing sentiments, a battleground of emotions. 'I felt like I was cheating on my wife.'

'Are you?'

'I didn't lie to you. It wasn't a story I made up. Is that what you think?'

Lacey bit her lip, looked away. 'Charlotte says I shouldn't trust you. But then she's prejudiced. A pilot from Clark Field got her sister pregnant.'

He grinned. 'And you believed a ludicrous story like that?'

'Do you want to talk to me about it?'

'About the pilot from Clark Field? I don't even know the guy.'

'About your wife.'

Keelan looked away. Two youths in white T-shirts and jeans, wearing black wrap-around sunglasses, walked in and spoke in whispers to the owner. Several red hundred-dollar notes were passed across the counter, behind the stacked Ovaltine tins and packets of dried noodles. The boys went out again.

'Did you see that?'

'It's my day off.'

'Triads.'

'Are we going to spend the day arresting sixteen-year-olds or did you have something better in mind?'

He turned back to her. 'They were just so blatant.'

'Just like you.'

'Like me?'

'I ask you about your wife and you start looking around for criminal activity.'

He smiled, caught out. 'It's just something I find a little hard to talk about,' he said. He looked away again, fumbling for the right words. 'Since it happened, I haven't been much interested in women, or anything. But now . . . I can't think of anything else.'

'But women.'

'But you.'

'You really take a girl's breath away. Here I was thinking you were doing a good impersonation of a man who's completely indifferent.'

'That was always Anna's complaint.'

'Anna?'

'My wife.'

'Funny. That's the first time I've heard you mention her name.'

She was right. It was the first time he had spoken her name since that night, he realised. Having her name on his tongue again felt like swallowing a razor blade. 'I'm making a complete mess of this.'

She smiled. 'Don't wait for me to contradict you. Look John, is this a good idea? Do you want to be with me? I can't do battle with a ghost.'

'There has to be something. I gave up smoking for you.'

She put her elbows on the table and leaned closer. 'My God. You Americans. You're so romantic.'

'Hey, Lace, don't mess with me.'

'I'm not messing with you, *yanqui*. It's Sunday and it's Charlotte's day off. My apartment is ten minutes away in the car. I don't know why, but I can't stop thinking about you either. Of course I've been wrong before.'

Their fingers touched on the table. 'I don't think you're wrong this time,' Keelan said.

They rode the elevator in silence. The tension between them was so palpable that Lacey felt that if she touched him she'd get a static charge. She opened the door to her apartment, led him to the bedroom and drew the shades. A soft yellow sun filtered between the microlites and threw chevrons of light over the quilt.

He stood by the bed and watched her.

She stepped out of her jeans and pulled off her jumper. She went to him, picked up his hand and placed it on her breast. 'Feel like ice to you, *yanqui*?' she murmured.

He shook his head.

'I hope you're nice. If you tell Tyler about this, I'll kill you, I swear.'

He put a finger to her lips. 'Shh,' he whispered. He kissed her. It was a gentle kiss, just the lips. She reached behind his head and pulled him to her again, parting her lips for him, feeling the exciting wetness of his mouth.

When she pulled away she unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it down from his shoulders. There was a scar, just below the ribline, the flesh around it puckered and still slightly pink; another, from the surgeon's knife, stretched around his abdomen almost to his spine. She traced the scars gingerly with her fingertips, as if they were still raw, felt the waxy smear of tissue over the entry wound.

She looked up at him.

He shrugged. 'What was it Reagan said? I forgot to duck.'

'Didn't they ever tell you about Kevlars?'

'I wasn't expecting trouble when it happened.'

'People die from wounds like this.'

'That's what the doctors told me.'

'These are not old scars.'

'I just had a bad run.'

She felt the mood slipping away. So she said: 'Any more surprises before I start to undo your belt.'

'Everything was there last time I looked.'

'Which was when?'

'Been a long time, Lace.'

She pulled him towards the bed. 'Then we'd better make up for it.'

I should have taken the money, he thought. If I'd taken the money Caroline and Anna would still be alive. If I'd taken the money they would not have had to pay for my mistakes, become the casualties in my crusade.

He sat on the edge of the bed, reached out and parted the microlites. Over the roofs of the apartments clustered on the hillside below he could make out the peaks and mists of Lantau island and for a moment the sunlight reflected on the windscreen of a car rushing along Pokfulam Road. The world rushed past and every day left him further behind, stranded at some instant when his own life had stopped.

Lacey's bare back was towards him. He watched the gentle

rise and fall of her breathing, could have traced the outline of her spine under the skin.

He knew she was awake. He could almost imagine her staring at the wall, eyes bright and angry.

He started to dress.

Anna had been dead nearly eighteen months. What was wrong with him? Most men he knew had cheated on their wives, but he could not even do it when his own wife was dead. Perhaps if it had been something beyond his control, a car crash perhaps, he thought he might have been able to get on with his life. But he felt now that it was the guilt that was crushing him. How can I indulge myself when they are dead? What right do I have to be happy when it was my fault that they died?

He did not doubt that it was the reason he had been unable to make love to Madeleine Lacey. He knew everything worked. He had lain awake often enough this last week with the evidence of his own virility pushing against the sheets while he thought about her. But that wasn't happiness, that was torment, and he deserved that. But this, having another beautiful woman beside him, to have a chance to be happy again . . .

That was undeserved. That was not for John Keelan. Not after he had allowed a gunman into the lives of his family and let him shoot them down.

If only he had taken the money.

'I'd better go,' he said.

Lacey turned over. He realised she had been crying. Her voice sounded hoarse. 'You don't have to,' she said.

'I think it would embarrass us both if I stayed,' he said.

Lacey rolled back onto her side. He went out, shutting the bedroom door gently behind him.

He felt a cold and hollow chill in the pit of his stomach. But he was used to that. That feeling had become a part of every day. He assumed he would feel this way for the rest of his life.

38

On board Born Rich

The Peak was strung with early lights, the sun sinking below Lantau island in the west, silhouetting the Trappist monastery against the mountains, staining the white cubes of the apartment blocks on Pokfulam and Mount Kellett the colour of rose. Its reflection caught a window which flashed suddenly with gold. The Lamma Channel was crowded with the yachts and varnished pleasure junks scurrying for the harbour at Aberdeen, many flying the flags of the great hongs and banks of Hong Kong.

Storm clouds were building in the west, behind the Red Ensign that flapped at the stern. The swell was rising. But in another quarter of an hour they would be back at their mooring in Aberdeen and thanks to the Vosper stabilisers the guests on the ninety-foot long *Born Rich* could not feel the roll of the waves; it did not upset the lobster and chicken on the Wedgwood service or the turrines of bird's nest soup or the silver salvers of Beluga Malossol Caviar Caspian or the flutes of 1980 Krug's Clos du Mesnil arrayed on white linen on tables under the awnings on the high poop.

Sir Timothy Man looked around the yacht. Many of Hong Kong's elite were among the guests; Li Ka-shing, the chairman of Hutchison Whampoa; Sir Run Run Shaw, one of the world's most successful film producers, who presided over the Hong Kong film industry as Cecil B. de Mille had once done in Hollywood; Sir Y-K, and Lady Kadoorie; Stanley Ho, the Macao casino operator and the property magnate Sir Pao Yue-kong, his neighbour in Deep Water Bay; even Chris Patten the governor. The chairman of Jardines had arrived late, landing by helicopter on the extended afterdeck.

There were movie stars like Jackie Chan and Anita Mui, as well as less well known *illuminati*, bankers from Barclays and the WestDeutsche Landesbank Girozentrale and from Bankers Trust.

It was an impressive assembly, and reaffirmed his own status in the world. The beautiful young Chinese woman in the cherry-red silk cheongsam was one of Hong Kong's Canto-pop stars, but he could end her career tomorrow. That balding Chinese in the ridiculous canvas trousers and Sperry topsiders was a 14K Red Pole and deferred to him as if he were his own *tai lo*, that *gwailo* in the blue-and-white striped shirt and Savile Row suit was payrolled to his own organisation to ensure one of his construction companies won government building tenders.

Sir Timothy fell into conversation with the singer. He was considering sleeping with her later. She was prattling about some industry gossip, but he was only pretending to listen. It amused him more to observe how she was trying to ingratiate herself with him. These days the knowledge of his own power was a far greater pleasure than sex.

He was interrupted by Timothy Wong. He came towards him, an arm outstretched, holding a brandy balloon. He was resplendent in black tuxedo and white fringed scarf. 'A wonderful party, Sir Timothy,' he said, grinning hugely. 'Your hospitality is legend in Hong Kong.'

Sir Timothy ignored the singer completely. She was just a decoration, after all, no more important than the ice sculpture on the buffet table. She, too, had appeared less attractive as the day wore on.

'It is just a humble little craft,' Sir Timothy said, 'you do me a great honour by your presence here.' In fact, as they both knew, the ninety-foot Broward was one of the finest vessels in the colony.

'I am the one who is honoured,' Timothy Wong said, 'simply to be invited to such an illustrious gathering.'

It was a fact, also, that there were no other QCs on board the *Born Rich*; most of the guest list was drawn from the world of entertainment and business. But as 489 of the Sun Yee On, Timothy Wong was rarely excluded from any party invitation.

'Come and join me in the salon,' Sir Timothy said to him. 'There is something I think we need to discuss.'

The salon had been designed in Italy, a recreation of an Edwardian salon with solid walnut panelling and red plush. There was a wall-mounted colour television and crystal wall sconces threw a subdued golden glow over the room. A Brahms fugue filtered through concealed quadraphonic speakers.

A trimly uniformed Chinese waiter brought a bottle of Courvoisier VSOP and was dismissed. Sir Timothy and Timothy Wong exchanged pleasantries as equals. There was an irony to their respective positions in Hong Kong society; Sir Timothy was now one of the colony's most prominent businessmen, but was also an initiated member of the Wo Sing Wo triad. He had never risen above the rank of 49, although he provided the organisational skills and financing for many of the triads' illegal enterprises.

Timothy Wong, on the other hand, although a prominent QC, was the so-called Dragon Head of Hong Kong's best organised triad, a position he had inherited from his father. He rarely, if ever, instigated any criminal enterprises, earning most of his income from various finance companies that he controlled. It was said he never had a problem with bad debts.

He scrupulously maintained the society's finances, receiving the dues from those engaged in the more nefarious activities of loan-sharking, extortion and narcotics dealing, representing the interests of his members when required.

As he was required to do today.

'I understand you have a problem with Eddie Lau,' Sir Timothy said.

The laughter and tinkle of glasses was muted down here, Timothy Wong noted. He could barely feel the vibration of the huge twin diesel motors. 'Indeed. One of my associates has come to me, and it would appear he has a legitimate complaint. He says that this Eddie Lau has attacked his enterprises, is trying to break his rice bowl. He accused my associate of stealing, then betrayed him to the yellow air, and murdered

three of his employees. My associate arranged a *gong-jou*, to try and reach an understanding with him, but he will not listen to reason. Now this Eddie Lau is encroaching on established business enterprises that have taken many years to build. What am I to do?'

Sir Timothy nodded, considering this information. 'I understand your dilemma,' he said. 'And I must tell you that I am in complete sympathy with your position.'

Timothy Wong appeared relieved. He sipped his Courvoisier. 'I told my associate that I had complete faith in the wisdom of Sir Timothy Man.'

Sir Timothy nodded his head, accepting the compliment and its implied but veiled threat. Although his social inferior, Timothy Wong's position in the Sun Yee On made him a dangerous man.

But Sir Timothy had already decided his course of action. The police had closed down four of his bars and raided all his mah-jongg parlours in Wanchai, and if he allowed them to continue to interrupt triad business, he would lose the confidence of his own people. He could not afford to let the situation deteriorate. Eddie Lau had been useful in the past, but now he was becoming a liability. He was undisciplined; a loose cannon, to use a *gwailo* expression. Eddie Lau should have come to see him before he embarked on this street war with a Sun Yee On 426.

He wondered if Eddie Lau had finally proved himself expendable.

'How are we to settle this?' Timothy Wong said.

'Business can only succeed in an atmosphere of harmony and concord,' Sir Timothy said. 'This matter must be settled quickly. Perhaps I can help you. But first you must agree that there will be no more violence.'

The other man hesitated. For The Ox, a full scale war with the Wo Sing Wo would be costly. Other Wo soldiers would be drafted in to fight against him, and there were always Vietnamese mercenaries for hire on the street. But they would all need to protect face.

'My associates will insist on defending their interests,' Timothy Wong pointed out.

'There will be no further need. Perhaps I can ensure that Eddie Lau is no longer a problem for you.'

'How can this be done?'

'If he is apprehended by the police, and they have evidence to use against him, he will no longer be able to disturb your associate's business.'

Timothy Wong tried to hide his delight at this unexpected offer. 'And what would you ask in return for this?' *For this betrayal*, went unsaid.

'It is no small thing to achieve. Perhaps to perform this service I shall require some compensation.'

'What form might this compensation take?'

'First your associate must give the yellow air what they require. A tourist was killed in the Queens Plaza. None of us will be allowed to engage in our normal business once more until the culprit is found.'

'It may be possible for this to be arranged.'

'Also, Eddie Lau will be difficult to replace. And I shall lose big face when he is arrested. As compensation, your associate must pay me a nominal amount, say five million Hong Kong dollars.'

Timothy Wong did not allow the shock to show on his face; five million Hong Kong dollars was not a nominal amount. But perhaps The Ox might agree that it would be better to pay the sum to rid himself of this Eddie Lau.

'I will have to talk to my associate. This is a lot of money.'

Sir Timothy shrugged. 'I am offering him a service at a very reasonable price. He must decide.' He got to his feet. 'Let us return to the party. We can watch the sunset from the poop deck.'

Timothy Wong followed Sir Timothy up the polished teak steps of the companionway. He had been surprised by Sir Timothy's offer, but it made sound business sense; it was not the first time that a triad sponsor had found that his *sai lo*, his little brother, had painfully over-reached himself. The Ox would hopefully see it as a sound business investment. Five million Hong Kong dollars against the cost of a street war.

It would allow Sir Timothy to keep face, and rid The Ox of the problem of Eddie Lau once and for all.

39

Happy Valley

An oppressive, humid dawn hung over Happy Valley. Trainers, jockeys and owners were scattered around the course watching the morning workout, or were huddled together in conference while stable hands walked the horses in their blankets.

Eddie found Sir Timothy Man near the winning post, leaning on a shooting stick, perfectly attired, as always, in Burberry tweed raincoat and cap. Eddie was wearing an electric blue suit and white silk shirt. He felt overdressed.

'Eddie,' Sir Timothy said.

'*Tai lo*,' Eddie said, respectfully.

'What do you think? She's a fine horse, *neh*? Her mother was a champion. Red Ruby.'

Lucky Gem cantered past, a big roan gelding, her flanks steaming, the jockey standing in the stirrups.

'Last time out she was disqualified for interference or it would have been six wins out of nine races.'

Eddie put his hands in his pockets and scowled. He had better things to do in the morning than stare at horses. But Sir Timothy had summoned him to the appointment and he had no choice.

'You owe me three million dollars, little brother,' Sir Timothy said.

'I never received my powder.'

'What powder?'

'The number four I buy from Bangkok. It was stolen from that idiot fisherman's trawler off Fat Chui island.'

'You used my three million dollars to buy heroin?'

'Two hundred kilos. It would have made us all rich.'

'What you did with the money is no concern of mine, though I have to tell you that I do not approve of the drug business. But that is not my concern. You asked me for a loan, I gave it to you. You still owe me three million.'

Eddie stared at him.

Sir Timothy's eyes were fixed on Lucky Gem on the far side of the track. 'You play the Happy Valley game, little brother?'

'Of course.'

'You are lucky?'

'Sometimes.'

'Sometimes. You know the secret of being lucky, little brother?'

Eddie shook his head, his hands still in his pockets.

'The secret is never to back a loser.' Sir Timothy was not smiling now. The sun rose over the hills and reflected on the glass in his spectacles. Eddie turned away.

'Yes, *tai lo*.'

Sir Timothy removed his glasses and cleaned them with a soft yellow cloth from his jacket pocket. 'After you pay me my three million dollars you must sit down with Pak Yok-kong and settle this disagreement.'

'The Ox stole our powder!'

'*Your* powder. And you have no proof of this. Absolutely no proof.'

'One of his cooks.'

'You will settle it. This war is disrupting business. We are not barbarians. You get in the way of our profit here, Lau Hsu-shui! You will meet The Ox in *gong-jou* and you will settle this!'

'He cheated me. You would have your three million and a big profit if it is not for that great pile of dung.'

'Settle it! Pay him what he wants for his face and walk away from this.'

And what about the face I lose? Eddie wanted to shout. Three million to you, half a million to The Ox, Louis Huu still breathing down my neck for seven million. I will have to borrow again just to pay all my debts! I will rather solve this problem my way. With my fist. 'No.'

Sir Timothy replaced his spectacles. 'Do not disobey me, little brother. I look after my stable. But if a horse is difficult, sometimes only one choice but to call the vet.'

Eddie's mouth twisted with contempt. He looked as if he had swallowed something foul. He bit back the curse that came to his lips. 'You do not have the ginger for it,' he said, and walked away.

Lacey had worked overtime all week on the Barbara Warhurst investigation without reward. Now, unexpectedly, a year-old case file on the uncleared murder of a fourteen-year-old Chinese girl in Morrison Hill had unexpectedly uncovered a sixty-nine-year-old grandfather who had confessed to indecently molesting young girls. He had told Lacey in the interview room that he believed that it brought him luck in gambling.

Lacey was at her desk typing up the report. When she had joined the Royal Hong Kong Police she had not imagined this part of the work, had thought that police work was as far from the life of a stenographer as she could get. The irony of it. Police work had more paperwork than any other job she knew. She had a friend who worked as a freelance journalist who did less typing than she did.

'If I were you, I'd get a secretary to do that.'

She looked up. It was Keelan. She tried to keep her emotions in check. What did she feel? Anger, hurt, sorrow? 'Are you applying for the position?'

'Hell no, I've got enough paper of my own to push around.'

There was a long and shuffling silence. The memories of the previous Sunday afternoon were still too fresh and raw.

'I've got an appointment at Narcotics at eleven.'

'Wrong building. Wrong street.'

'Right.' He stayed right there, leaning in the doorway, turning into a statue. Guilt-ridden male, by Rodin, Lacey thought. 'Got a minute?' he said.

'Sure,' she said, brightly. 'Have two if you like.'

'About the other day.'

Lacey found it hard to look at him. What was there to say?

Somehow she felt it was her fault. 'It's all right. We're grown ups.' If only I felt like one.

'I just wanted to apologise.'

'Apology accepted,' she said, too quickly. She didn't want to talk about this. When you took off your clothes for a man and you didn't get a reaction it was hard to take it any other way but that it was personal, that it was your own fault.

'Yeah. I don't know what happened.'

That's the problem. Nothing happened. 'We don't have to talk about this.'

'Yeah. I guess not.'

Lacey wished he'd just go. This was too humiliating.

'Well, I guess it might be better if we didn't see each other again. Keep the relationship purely professional.'

'Sure.' She felt as if she was going to choke. What was it her father had always said about her? More balls than the boys. No sex for almost a year and then when she finally took the plunge she proved they were right about her. The ice queen. This work got to you that way. Making the world a better place to live for everyone but yourself.

'It's never happened to me before,' he said.

Oh, great, pile on the humiliation. In a minute I'm going to punch you in the mouth. 'I think we've gone as far as we need to with this conversation,' she said.

'It's not your fault. I'm sorry.'

'Thanks for calling by.'

Keelan held up his hands, a helpless gesture of surrender. He left.

Lacey stared at the wall, for a long time, then picked up three files, each an inch thick, and threw them at the wall. When Tyler came in she was staring at the litter of papers over the shelves and the floor.

'You okay, Lace?'

'Sure. Sure, I'm okay,' she said. 'Paperwork.'

She sat back down behind the typewriter and finished her incident report. Big girls don't cry. At least that's what her father always said.

40

Kennedy Town

The meat processing plant was the second and smaller of the town's two abattoirs. It faced Belcher Bay, close to the China Merchants Wharf. There were two sheds, one where the killing and boning took place, the other where the fifth quarter was processed. There was a row of aluminium clad sheds that served as an office and administration block. The yards and buildings were surrounded by a chain-link fence.

A nightwatchman patrolled the yards from six o'clock until five the next morning, when the first shift started work. But tonight the plant was unguarded. He had been paid to leave early, go home and say nothing.

The red tail lights of the Mazda blinked on as the driver stopped in front of a padlocked gate. A man jumped out of the passenger side and fumbled with a key. Then he swung the gate open and the Mazda drove through.

The car stopped in front of the main shed, and the gate squeaked shut. The driver stopped and turned off the lights.

He got out and flicked on a sturdy halogen torch. His associate joined him and together they threw open the boot and struggled to heft something onto the ground. It was wrapped in a blanket. One of them went to the door of the shed, shining the torch on a set of keys he took from his zippered jacket. They carried their load inside.

The driver returned to the Mazda to fetch a canvas holdall from under the front seat.

Peter Mui lay on the floor, a small, ovate bullet hole in his forehead, and a look of surprise and disbelief on his face,

which looked pale and achingly young in the harsh light of the fluorescents. Normally, they would have left him on the street as a warning to other enemies of the Sun Yee On, but they had specific orders to keep this particular killing away from the eyes of the police.

There was the faint but unmistakable odour of offal and dried blood. The tables and floors had been cleaned after that day's work, but as both men knew, from their short but spectacular apprenticeship in their trade, you can never quite get the smell of blood out of anything.

The two men lifted Peter Mui onto the stainless steel boning table, stripped off his clothes and put them in the canvas holdall, to be disposed of later. Also inside were two pairs of white overalls. They slipped them on over their jeans and nylon jackets.

The two young men looked at each other. Their names were Ricky Lam and Daniel Tu and neither of them was many months past his eighteenth birthday. This was the first time they had washed anyone for the triad and they were nervous.

Daniel fetched a filleting knife from the racks on the wall, and stood over the dead body, staring. He was not in the least bit squeamish. He simply had no idea where to start. He decided to remove the arms first, and take it from there.

Peter Mui had made an astonishing mess, but the boys knew that the liquid parts of him could be disposed of by directing all fluids down the drains with the hose. They dumped the limbs, head and torso into a stainless steel bin and hefted it out of the boning room to the meat grinder.

The grinder lay at the end of a long chute under the boning tables, where the discarded bones were carried each day by revolving corkscrew blades. Ricky and Daniel had decided against using this piece of apparatus as they did not want the extra trouble of cleaning it afterwards.

By contrast with the white tile and stainless steel of the boning room, the shed that housed the meat grinder was no more than a few sheets of corrugated iron attached to the roof

of the main building to form an annexe, and was open to the elements at one end. The floor was bare concrete, and there was ancient offal and blood caked to its surface. The casing of the machine was rusted, and the only light was from a single bulb suspended on a long and worn flex.

'You know how it works?' Martin said.

'I was here yesterday. The manager showed me around.'

Some iron steps led up the outside of the machine to a small opening almost at roof level. Daniel and Ricky struggled to heft the steel bin to the landing. Ricky stared into the maw of the machine. There was a steel roller, with sharpened steel prongs attached to it. A chute led away from the end of the machine into a collecting bin. The machine processed pork balls for the poorer restaurants and hawkers of Yaumatei and Mongkok. Peter Mui was to be a new and sumptuous addition to the diets of a few dozen lucky diners.

'He's going to make a mess,' Ricky said.

'Once he's been through this you won't recognise him as human. When he's in the trays it's the manager's problem. He knows what to do. He's a sworn brother.'

Daniel went back down the steps and found the start button for the machine. It whirred into life, the generator grunting and coughing a few feet away. Ricky stared into the chute at the gleaming metal teeth, now spinning on the roller.

He took Peter's left lower leg from the bin and dropped it in.

The bones sounded like firecrackers. In seconds the roller had reduced the bones to small pieces, the meat into cubes. As the rollers continued to spin, the human remains of Peter Mui were reduced. Ricky was fascinated. He dropped in the head and thigh. He was astonished at the noise and the mess. The meat carcasses that were normally fed into this machine were mostly ribs and skulls, but Peter had retained most of his body fluids and now they sent up a fine pink spray over the metal sides of the chute. He took a step back, concerned about getting some of Peter Mui into his hair.

He threw a little more of Peter into the machine. Suddenly the pitch of the machine rose to a shrill whine.

Daniel looked up from below. 'What's happening?'

Ricky stared into the chute. He realised he should have jointed the arm, as he had done to the legs. 'He's jammed,' he shouted. He stepped forward. 'Shut it off!'

Daniel Tu could not hear his partner over the whine of the machine. He saw Ricky step forward, and reached for the emergency red stop button. He was a moment too slow.

Ricky Lam screamed and jerked his hand away, staring in disbelief at the blood spurting from the top of his hand. He instinctively jammed his fist over the bleed, realised with horror that some of his hand was gone. He began to walk in circles on the landing, clutching at his injured fingers.

'What happened?' Daniel shouted.

'Told you to turn off the machine!'

'You should have waited!'

'My finger! Lost one of my fingers!'

Daniel stared at his partner in horror. He was spurting blood everywhere. 'What are we going to do?'

'Help me stop the bleeding!'

Daniel ran back to the boning room, grabbed Peter Mui's shirt and jacket from the canvas holdall. When he got back to the meat grinder Ricky was still walking in circles, his hand between his knees. Daniel helped him wrap the shirt around his hand as a dressing and helped him down the stairs.

Daniel looked around. Half of Peter Mui was still in the bin, the other half, white fat and raw red mincemeat, was at the other end of the chute.

'My finger,' Ricky said.

'It's all right,' Daniel said. He went back to the machine, and peered into the chute. The arm was still jammed between the rollers, a bloodied finger separate. He reached down, picked it up and wrapped it in Peter Mui's jacket.

'Got to get me to the hospital,' Ricky said.

Daniel hesitated. There was Peter's blood all over the boning floor, bits of him still waiting to be fed into the grinder.

Ricky read his thoughts. 'Come back and finish later!' he shouted. 'Must get me to the hospital!'

Daniel helped him back to the car. He had lost a lot of blood and his skin was pale and cold.

Daniel jumped in, threw the jacket with Ricky's finger in the console and started the engine. Ricky scrabbled to wind down the window with his good hand and vomited.

Daniel drove out through the gates and headed down Belcher's Street, then turned up the hill towards Pokfulam Road. He decided to make for the twenty-four-hour casualty department at the Queen Mary hospital.

The triage sister on duty assumed the two young men who staggered in at twelve-fifteen that night had been in a fight. One of them had his hand wrapped in a blood-soaked dressing, the other was carrying an expensive-looking jacket with suspiciously dark stains over it.

'Lost his finger!' Daniel shouted at her. 'We were cutting some meat and the knife slipped! He chopped it right off!'

She calmly led the two men through to the casualty ward and called over the duty intern. He took away the makeshift dressing and inspected the wound. His patient was already exhibiting signs of shock. He ordered an intravenous colloid and paged for a surgeon.

The triage nurse attached a pulse oxymeter and blood pressure cuff, while a nurse fetched admission forms. The intern accepted the part second from Daniel and unwrapped it carefully in a laboratory that led off from the casualty ward. If there was any hope of saving the man's finger, it would have to be placed in a sterile dressing and re-packed in ice.

He stared at the amputated finger and blinked. It had been a long night and he was not sure at first if he had made a mistake. He returned to the patient to check.

'How did you say this happened?' he asked Martin.

'We were cutting some meat at our restaurant,' Daniel interrupted. 'The knife slipped.'

The bleeding had stopped. The resulting wound was jagged, a stripping wound inconsistent with the clean incision that a knife would have caused. Something was definitely wrong. He returned to the laboratory to re-examine the amputated finger.

* * *

There are two uniformed policemen on duty at all times in the emergency rooms of all Hong Kong hospitals. The intern summoned them on his pager.

'There's something highly irregular here,' he said when the two constables presented themselves in the corridor. 'I think perhaps you had better speak with the two young men we have in our casualty room.'

'What appears to be the problem?' one of the policemen asked.

'One of them has somehow amputated his index finger. In fact he brought a digit with him to the hospital.'

'And?' the constable persisted.

'And that would be all very well. But the part he brought with him was a middle finger. And it is very definitely not his.'

41

Kam Chun-kwan sat in the same chair in which he had proclaimed complete ignorance of anything except his own name just a week before, and named Ricky Lam as the killer of Barbara Warhurst. Lacey called in a stenographer to copy down his new statement.

Then Lacey listened a second time with weary resignation, her chin resting on her hand. Kam showed no interest in the whole procedure, reciting the statement as if he were reading from a blackboard. He gave his occupation as businessman.

'So you saw what happened?' Lacey said.

'See everything,' Kam said, in Cantonese. 'Happens right in front of me. How can I not see everything?'

'I asked you that question directly after the shooting. You said you were in the kitchen.'

Kam did not seem disturbed by the apparent contradiction. 'Do not understand,' he said.

'Go on with your statement,' Lacey said.

'I am serving a customer. Hear a shout. This man runs into my restaurant.'

'What man?'

'Man with the knife.'

'Whose name you don't know.'

'Never see this man before. Attacks this boy.'

'What boy?'

'Ricky Lam.'

'How do you know his name is Ricky Lam?'

'Comes into the restaurant many times. I know him.'

'He is a friend?'

'Yes, a friend. He is eighteen years old. Lives on the Kornhill Estate in Taikoo Shing.'

Lacey turned to the stenographer. 'I wonder if he knows

the passport number?' she said, in English. The young policewoman smiled.

Kam understood, of course, but pretended he did not. 'This Ricky Lam waves the gun and chases this man with the knife out of my restaurant into the plaza. I see everything. Fires his gun as the man runs away, shoots this tourist.'

'You saw all this, Kam Chun-kwan?'

'Yes. of course. I am right there. I see everything.'

Lacey shook her head. 'Kam Chun-kwan, I interviewed you about three hours after this incident in this very room and you told me you were in the kitchen when this shooting took place and you did not see anything.'

Kam sighed, watching Lacey from behind heavy-lidded eyes. 'I do not understand.'

'No, neither do I.' Lacey made a hole in the bottom of her polystyrene cup with her pen. Kam stared at the wall. An unappetising creature, she thought. His suit and his Italian leather shoes were of the best quality but he somehow contrived to look seedy. Perhaps it was the eagle tattoo on the back of his hand, or the nicotine stains on his fingers. The whole world is killing itself with tobacco, Lacey thought. And his teeth were bad. She could smell his breath from the other side of the table.

A good defence counsel would have his credibility in tatters in a few minutes. 'What was this Ricky Lam wearing at the time of the attack?' she said.

Kam shrugged his shoulders. 'Not my business.'

'You don't remember?'

He shook his head.

'That's a coincidence, because I talked to four other eye-witnesses to this incident in here this morning and none of them can remember what Ricky Lam was wearing either. But they all know his name and address.'

Kam shrugged. 'Not my business,' he repeated.

Lacey dismissed the stenographer and stood up. 'Wait here,' she said to Kam.

She went back to her office, collected the other four witness statements she had taken that morning. All had voluntarily

come to the police station off the street to volunteer information on the killing of Barbara Warhurst. All had been interviewed by herself or Tyler the afternoon of the shooting and all had claimed to have been looking the other way when the incident took place. Now they had come forward within hours of each other to name Ricky Lam as the culprit. Their statements were almost identical. Somebody had done some very careful coaching.

By a strange coincidence Ricky Lam was at present in custody in the police station in Central for the murder of a known triad associate named Peter Mui.

Tyler walked in, leaned his weight against the door jamb. 'How goes it, Lace?'

'Up to my ears in eye witnesses.'

'Please, no more talk about body parts. I spent the morning at a meat processing plant in Kennedy Town.'

'Meat balls for lunch?'

'I'm thinking of becoming vegetarian. Ever seen a meat grinder Lace?'

'It wasn't part of the formal education at the girl's school I went to.'

'This one still had half a body sticking out of it. These characters were turning it into pork balls. The manager was pretty upset we closed him down for the day. I think if he'd had his way he would have pushed the rest of the torso and limbs through first thing this morning and carried on with the day's work.'

'Stop, you're making me hungry.'

'Yeah, we've got a great job.' He slumped into the chair on the other side of the desk. 'Manager claimed he knew nothing about what was going on, but my bet is the whole place is a triad operation. We'll probably find a dummy company running the whole set-up.'

'What about this Ricky Lam?'

'Confessed. Just as well, fingerprinting him would have been a proper bastard.'

'He could hardly deny all involvement.'

'True. But get this, Lace. He's also confessed to the murder of Barbara Warhurst. Through his lawyer. Who

just happens to be a Queen's Council by the name of Timothy Wong.'

'I wonder how he affords representation like that?' Lacey said, deadpan.

'Offered him free meat for a year, I imagine.'

'He's confessed?'

Tyler nodded. 'Not to murder, but to accidental shooting. But he's still wrapped it up for us. They're all very happy upstairs. We're feeding it to the press in about half an hour. What do you make of that?'

Lacey picked up the four written statements on her desk, bundled them together and slid them across the desk to Tyler. 'A number of other good citizens also rediscovered their civic duty this morning. Neat, isn't it?'

'Neat? It's symmetrical.'

'Looks like somebody decided to put the finger on Ricky Lam for their own convenience. So to speak.'

'Please, no more digit jokes, Lace. I've had them all morning.' He shuffled through the statements. 'So, let's see how this works. Ricky Lam is arrested for murdering Peter Mui. He's stone cold on that one. So someone has a quiet word with him, tells him to take the rap for Barbara Warhurst as well. The usual deal; we'll take care of your family, make sure you have an easy time in prison, both prison terms to run concurrent, when you get out in how ever many years less time off for good behaviour we'll have your superannuation ready to roll-over. Does this have the ring of plausibility to it, Lace?'

'Not if you're going to publish it, sir. It's been done before.'

'And who do you think would have dreamed up something like that?'

'I hope you're not suggesting that this has anything to do with your conversation with Sir Timoathy Man.'

'Perish the thought.' Tyler got to his feet. 'What did Louis Armstrong say about it? It's a wonderful world.'

'Do you think Ricky Lam really did it?'

'You mean did he pull the trigger on the gun that killed that poor girl? I don't know, Lace. If it wasn't him, it was

someone like him. Which begs the question: in the end, does it matter?'

Lacey shrugged her shoulders. She wasn't sure she could find an answer to that.

The phone rang on Lacey's desk. There was an urgent call for Tyler.

It was Sir Timothy Man.

42

Sir Timothy Man's residence

The morning view from the Peak was obliterated by mist. Everything dripped with damp, butterflies skittered between the hibiscus and jasmine, long-tailed magpies swooped and were gone. Tyler's brown Toyota struggled up Old Peak Road. Tyler changed down into second gear.

'You may have to get out and push,' Tyler said.

'Sorry. That's not in my job description,' Lacey told him.

An elderly Chinese appeared out of the mist, poised in balletic posture in a park, practising *tai ji quan*. Then he was gone.

Sir Timothy Man's villa was on Bluff Path. The gateway was guarded by red stone dragons and a security camera. Tyler announced his presence to the loudspeaker mounted in the gatepost and the portals swung open.

The villa nestled at the end of the driveway, glazed green tiles slick with dew, upturned eaves supported on gilded pillars. A black Mercedes 380 SE and a grey Rolls-Royce Phantom Saloon were being carefully polished by a man in a dark blue uniform. The Rolls-Royce's registration was GW-782.

'782. Always prosperous in business,' Lacey translated.

'I'd rather be lucky in love,' Tyler said.

Lacey got out of the car. 'Either would do me,' she said.

There was a croquet lawn in front of the house, grass tennis courts almost hidden by the shrubbery. A fat golden carp flicked its tail idly in an ornamental pond.

'I prefer my two-bedroom apartment in Pokfulam,' Lacey said. 'It's much cosier.'

'I'm much happier in Shatin,' Tyler said.

A boy in white coat and trousers met them at the front doors and escorted them inside.

'Hope you remembered to wipe your feet,' Lacey whispered.

'As long as he doesn't order me to take my shoes off,' Tyler whispered back. 'I've got holes in my socks.'

'Me too,' Lacey said.

Sir Timothy Man wore a burgundy silk dressing gown with a paisley pattern over a pair of grey trousers and velvet pigeon-grey slippers. Lacey was not sure if he was simply being informal, superior or if they had disturbed him when he was halfway through dressing.

As they entered he was standing by the window of his study, looking over the high rises of Victoria, his back towards them. Lacey took in the room; a massive chinoise blackwood desk with ball and claw feet, an elephant hide chair, a tigerskin in the middle of the floor. The curtains were raw silk, and the desk lamp had a Lalique shade. The walls were panelled walnut, covered with photographs of the great man himself, posing with various dignitaries, including Deng Xiaoping and the Queen.

The two horseshoe-backed chairs in front of the desk Lacey recognised as genuine antiques, eighteenth century Huang Huali. Along the far wall was a red velvet chaise longue, and next to it, two carp gawped behind the glass walls of their aquarium.

Sir Timothy turned around and offered them a rare smile. 'Ah. The upholders of justice.'

Lacey did not detect any note of irony.

'Perhaps I can offer you some tea,' Sir Timothy said, and he nodded to the houseboy who had conducted them through the house. He indicated the two chairs in front of the desk. 'Please. Take a seat.'

They sat down. Sir Timothy remained standing, returning his gaze to the window. Yellow bolts of sun had pierced the mist, peeling back the haze to reveal the morning traffic on the harbour.

'I read in the newspapers that you have apprehended the persons responsible for the murder of that unfortunate tourist.'

'Some community minded citizens stepped forward to help us with our enquiries,' Tyler said, deadpan.

'Do I understand then, that my associates in Wanchai will be able to carry on their business without further harassment?'

Tyler looked at Lacey. Is this what this is about? 'I would hardly call upholding the law, harassment.'

'Still. It is comforting to know that their children will have food on the table this evening. One hates to think of children starving.'

Tyler gave him a look: you're breaking my heart.

The tea arrived: White Peony. The white-jacketed servant lifted the lid from the brew pot and passed it to Sir Timothy, who closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, as if it was a cigar. He nodded to confirm his satisfaction, and the servant poured the tea into three small hand-painted china cups.

Tyler, more accustomed to polystyrene and poisonous coffee, looked ill at ease. It did not escape Sir Timothy's attention. 'I hope you are not going to ask me for milk and sugar,' he said, pleasantly.

'I may be a *gwailo*, but I'm not a barbarian,' Tyler said.

Lacey smiled.

Tyler sipped the scalding hot tea. 'You have a beautiful home,' he said, making it sound like an accusation.

'Beauty is a transient thing,' Sir Timothy said. There was a Tang figurine on his desk. He picked it up, held it in the palm of his hand. 'Kuan Ti,' he said.

Lacey recognised the Chinese God of War, worshipped by the Chinese as a warrior, the embodiment of right action, loyalty and integrity, the patron saint of pawnbrokers, the Royal Hong Kong Police and the triad societies. The ironies and nuances of Chinese spiritual life still dazzled her.

'One must admire the skill and beauty in a work of art,' Sir Timothy was saying, turning the figurine to the light, 'for beauty is something to be treasured in an ugly world.'

'Indeed,' Tyler said.

'For it is an ugly world. Sometimes those of us who live within the law forget that.'

Lacey fought to control her expression.

'In fact, my visit to your office has reminded me of my civic responsibilities and how we must all do our utmost in the fight against cruelty and venality in our city.'

Tyler fidgeted in his chair. 'You have something for us?' he said.

Sir Timothy reached into a drawer and took out a brown manila envelope. He passed it across the desk. Tyler opened it, took out a thick sheaf of documents. There was silence in the room as he studied them. Finally he passed them to Lacey.

There were bank statements, credit transfers, bills of lading, company records, several link analyses showing the relationships between dozens of shelf and trust companies, none of them familiar to Lacey.

She looked up. Sir Timothy was smiling. 'These papers are all relevant to the financial dealings of two men you may know by the names of Edward Lau and Vincent Tse. It is a record of transactions they have made in relation to the purchase of illegal narcotics.'

Tyler looked at Lacey. She wanted to jump up and down on the spot like a child. Instead she raised an eyebrow. Tyler smiled. He turned back to Sir Timothy. 'May I ask how these came to be in your possession?'

'They are quite genuine,' he answered, anticipating Tyler's reservations. 'But no, I cannot tell you how I came by them. I pulled some strings, as they say. If I should ever be asked about these documents after you leave here, I should have to say that I have never seen them before in my life. Are we understood?'

Lacey was reminded of being lectured by her headmistress.

'There is one other item that may be of use to you,' Sir Timothy said. He took a notebook cassette recorder from his pocket, of the type used by journalists. He pressed the play button. The voices were speaking in Cantonese.

'You owe me three million dollars, little brother.'

'I never received my powder.'
'What powder?'
'The number four I buy in Bangkok. It was stolen from that idiot fisherman's trawler off Fat Chui island.'
'You used my three million dollars to buy heroin?'
'Two hundred kilos. It would have made us all rich.'
'What you did with the money is no concern of mine, though I have to tell you that I do not approve of the drug business. But that is not my concern. You asked me for a loan, I gave it to you. You still owe me three million.'

He ejected the tape from the cassette and passed it across the desk to Lacey, who stared at him, astonished. 'Is that helpful?' Sir Timothy asked her.

Lacey took a few moments to recover from the shock of the tape recorded voices. 'Who are the voices on that tape?'

'One is a gentleman known to you as Eddie Lau. The other voice belongs to me.'

'You loaned him three million Hong Kong dollars?'

'Not a crime, I believe. The loan was made in good faith.'

She leaned forward. 'Sir Timothy, is there any connection between the murder of Barbara Warhurst and Eddie Lau?'

He gave her a contemptuous glance. He did not intend to be interrogated by a woman, and he wished to demonstrate that he found such a question onerous. 'How should I know that?' he said.

Lacey and Tyler exchanged glances. Once again, a deal had been done, and they had been thrown the crumbs. But this time it was a very large crumb. This time they had Eddie Lau.

'More tea?' Sir Timothy said with a soft smile.

43

Happy Valley

Sir Timothy's private box at Happy Valley was crowded, three dozen guests eating a buffet lunch of lobster, chicken and smoked salmon. The platters of food were laid out on a table that was covered with a snow white Irish linen tablecloth. The centrepiece was an ice sculpture of Sir Timothy's prize racehorse, Lucky Gem.

The women were furred and diamonded, the men sleek in Italian suits and silk ties.

A waiter brought a tray of Buck's Fizz. Eddie Lau took two, passed one to Vincent, and turned back to the window. The runners were on the far side of the course but the huge in-field video screen relayed close-up images of the field.

If the race ended now he had a quinella.

He heard the alarm from the cellular phone in his jacket pocket. Without taking his eyes from the track he flicked up the aerial an answered.

A woman's voice. 'Where are you?'

'Ruby–ah. I am just getting lucky at the races.'

'Not got much luck left now.'

He heard the tension in her voice. Something had gone badly wrong. 'Problem?'

'Got a whisper from the yellow air. They got a warrant for you.'

He grinned, in case anyone was watching. Never let anyone know your bad news in Hong Kong. It was like putting blood in the water. 'What for, Ruby–ah?'

'Got everything on you, no shit. You and Vincent. Whole army of accountants and auditors working on you now, heya. They got the scent of the money.'

Eddie kept his eyes on the track. One of his horses had slipped back to third. They were coming around the final bend and into the straight. The groundswell of noise from the crowd rose to a roar. Eddie followed the race on the video screen. The jockeys were leaning forward in the saddle, whips raised, reins tight. A European woman next to him was slapping her race programme against her thigh in excitement.

Eddie stopped smiling. 'How?' he said.

'Ah Kung,' Ruby said into the phone.

Timothy Man.

Lucky Gem came down the outside in the straight and challenged the leader. Eddie looked across the box at Sir Timothy. He was calmly sipping champagne, his face creased in a perpetual smile.

Lucky Gem thundered home. The excitement in the box reached a climax and faded to a buzz of excited laughter and conversation. Eddie replaced his smile.

'Better get out of Hong Kong, Eddie–ah,' Ruby said.

'Will phone you,' Eddie said, and he ended the call, folding down the aerial. Timothy Man! Rump-sniffing son of a leper! May all his family's property be ruined and may his ancestors' bones be eaten by wild pigs!

'What is it?' Vincent whispered.

'Cannot stay for the next race,' Eddie answered.

Suddenly Sir Timothy Man was standing beside them. His mood was expansive, the genial host. 'How is your luck?' he said.

'I think this is a bad luck day for me. More better we go, I think.'

'I told you to put your money on Lucky Gem, never mind. But there are still many races to go. Your luck can change.'

'Luck always changes. Luck is a butterfly.'

'You have the mind of a poet, Ah Shui.'

'And the claws of a tiger.' Eddie looked at Vincent and nodded. 'Thank you for your hospitality, *tai lo*. Sorry we must leave so soon.'

Sir Timothy Man watched them go. He could not truthfully say he did not regret what he had done. Eddie Lau had proved

to be a very useful weapon, on occasion. But to have a safe ship, every cannon had to be tied down.

He returned to his smoked salmon and Veuve Cliquot.

Eddie and Vincent left the Happy Valley racetrack in Eddie's Porsche. Eddie drove carefully through the afternoon traffic, reining in his impatience. Must not attract the attention of the police now!

He reached inside the console, took out a sealed brown manila envelope. He handed it to Vincent. 'Two passports,' he said. 'Kept them for emergency, like now. Also there is fifty thousand cash. We buy two tickets on the first flight out of Kai Tak.'

'Do not trust Ruby–ah. Ah Kung will never betray us to the yellow air.'

'Timothy Man is the rotting stalk of a leper. If Ruby is right I will gouge out his eyes with a spoon and jump on his secret sack until his seed squirts out of his ears!'

'With respect. Ruby Wen is wrong!'

'Cannot take the risk! If she is right we will be entered in the register and never see the sun again!' He fumbled in his jacket pocket for his cigarettes and lit one from the lighter on the dashboard. His hands were shaking.

'Still have accounts in Taipei. Maybe five million.'

'*Dew neh loh moh!* We will lose everything in Hong Kong, all our property, all our cash! If Timothy Man betrays me, I will wash him!'

By the time the warrants for Eddie Lau and Vincent Tse were signed, both men were aboard a Dragon Air flight to Guanzhou that was already taxi-ing down the runway at Kai Tak. By seven o'clock that evening both men were installed in the Century Plaza Hotel in Shenzhen, just across the border.

Later that same evening Ruby Wen booked herself onto the first class section of a Cathay Pacific flight to Bangkok. It was business as usual.

PART TWO

To be on the wire is life; the rest is waiting.

Kurt Wallenda
high wire artist

44

Bangkok

When Lucien Crocé stepped off the Air France 747 at Don Muang the smell and the heat rose from the tarmac and hit him like a smack in the face. He had forgotten how miserable this country was at this time of year. He climbed onto the transfer bus, crammed alongside the other sweating passengers from the flight, thrown from the pampered cocoon of the aircraft into this war zone atmosphere.

Inside the terminal uniformed men in dark glasses sat behind the desks, studying passports and visas. Not much evidence of the Land of Smiles here, Lucien thought.

His mother was waiting for him in the arrivals lounge. He had not seen her for a year, and he had forgotten, as he always did, how beautiful she was; no longer in a provocative way, but still slim, serene, poised. She had always hidden her olive skin from the sun, so she did not have the leathery look of so many European women who had spent all their lives in the tropics. She wore a dress of sky blue Thai silk, and her hair, still long and black, was held back from her forehead with tortoiseshell combs. Without make-up, with little jewellery, she looked as radiant as he remembered her when he was a child.

She put her arms around his neck and hugged him. 'Luc, you look wonderful.'

'I'm sweating like a lump of dough. When I left Paris it was five degrees.' He looked down at his shirt. It was almost transparent with sweat.

'Som will bring your bags. The car is right outside. Come and tell me all your news.'

* * *

The Mercedes limousine glided along the expressway, past rice paddis and new industrial estates and squalid shanty towns built over stinking *klongs*. Bangkok was as he always remembered it, a nightmare of traffic, heat, concrete and noise. The city was sinking faster than Venice into Asia's ancient swamps, its streets clogged with Japanese cars and motorcycles, its air stinging with carbon monoxide; and still the Japanese pumped another one hundred thousand cars a month onto its streets. Lucien stared at the Marlboro hoardings, the gory cinema posters, the snake-eaved roofs of the wats, fast disappearing behind the rising towers of concrete and glass. The last time he had been here he had read in a magazine that one in ten persons in the Thai capital was a heroin addict, and one in ten was a prostitute. Yet it also had some of Asia's largest banks, their vaults bulging with narco-dollars.

'How can you live here?' he murmured.

Noelle smiled. 'How can you live in a city where the temperature is five degrees?'

'At least I don't have to cut the air with a knife and fork.'

They were waved through an intersection by a policeman wearing a white mask to protect himself from the fumes.

'How is Paris?' Noelle said.

It is like me asking: 'How is Tokyo?' Lucien thought. Although Noelle had been born in France, she had been to Paris just twice, both occasions in the last few years, to visit him.

'Cold.'

'And business goes well?'

Lucien offered up a bland smile. '*D'accord*,' he said. 'Okay.'

In fact business was shit. All of life was shit. He might lose his apartment in St Germain and the business as well if he didn't find four hundred thousand francs in the next month. But there was time enough for that story later.

He supposed.

'The last time I called you, you did not sound quite yourself.'

'Just a little tired. You know how it is.'

'While you are in Bangkok we must see that you get some

rest. Or recreation. Whatever it is you need.' A sweet and enigmatic smile. 'How long will you stay?'

He shrugged his shoulders. If he didn't get the money there would be no point in going back. 'Perhaps two weeks.'

She squeezed his hand. 'It is good to see you again.' A beat, and then: 'I suppose you will want to see your father.'

'I am sure he is expecting me,' Lucien said.

Noelle nodded. 'Oh, yes, *mon cher*. He is expecting you.'

45

Once it was the City of Angels, gold-leafed wats rising above the palm trees that clung to the banks of the Chao Phrya river. Now it was the City of Sin, best known for massage and money, its modern office towers rising in necrotic profusion through the swamp. The place itself, Lucien thought, is like a movie set; as modern America pretends to be the Wild West, Bangkok pretends it is Somerset Maugham's Asia. But now the wats are relics, dinosaur footprints in the changing face of Bangkok, the once graceful river is choked with effluent and plastic and sex is slapped on to everything like tomato sauce. But behind the bone-white cliffs of the condominiums, the Doric columns, the Japanese department stores and restaurants that pretend to be dining cars and tramp steamers, Bangkok grows older and ugly, cancered and cynical.

Baptiste Crocé's bar was in the Patpong district, the city's notorious red light area, two narrow streets between the Silom and Suriwongse Roads. In the heat of the afternoon, the area looked drab and rather sad. Unlit neon signs advertised the Pussy Galore, Love Nest, Superstar and the Lipstick Bar – the entrance in the shape of a girl's mouth. Some of the bar girls were just arriving for work, demure in freshly ironed dresses, carrying shiny red plastic handbags.

Lucien ignored the pitches of the pavement vendors hawking their cheap paintings, copy watches and printed T-shirts, and pushed open the door of 69's – his father had become less subtle as he grew older, he decided – and waited for a moment inside the door while his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness.

The place was almost empty, hung over. There was just

one bored Thai girl behind the bar, just a few customers sitting around in the banquettes, drinking San Miguels.

A middle-aged man sat in one of the alcoves with a young Asian woman. At first Lucien thought the girl must be one of the club's dancers but then he saw that her dress was too expensive, and she did not have the darker coffee colouring of the northern Thais that most of the bars employed. Chinese, he decided.

His father saw him and his face creased into a broad smile of pleasure. He jumped to his feet. 'Luc! Luc, my boy!' He threw his arms around him and embraced him. 'I have been waiting for you! When did you get into town?'

'Last night.'

'And you wait until now to come and see me?' The reproach was a mild one. 'I suppose your mother makes first claim on you these days.' Baptiste waved him to a seat. 'Come, sit down!'

Baptiste signalled to the barman who brought a glass and a cold bottle of San Miguel to the table.

'Ruby, this is my son, Lucien,' he said, in English. 'He has just arrived in Bangkok from Paris. Luc, this adorable creature is my good friend Ruby. The most beautiful woman in all Asia, as you can see. I want desperately to go to bed with her but she says I am too old and she will kill me. She is probably right.'

Ruby Wen held out her hand. Lucien took it. Soft and cool, like touching a china doll.

'Ruby, she is also a business associate,' Baptiste added, almost as a warning.

Lucien knew what that meant. She was a criminal of some sort. '*Enchanté*,' he said.

Baptiste squeezed his shoulder. 'So! How have you been, Lucien? *Ça va*? *Bordel de merde*, I wish I was as young as you again.' He turned to Ruby, and in English: 'Good looking bastard, *hein*?'

Ruby gave him a hard stare and shrugged her shoulders.

Why did his father always manage to embarrass him? Lucien wondered. Was it deliberate or just an unfortunate by-product of his pride? He took a better look at Ruby Wen.

Not classically beautiful, but her perfume, her presence, the calculated sexuality of her clothes stirred him. He would have liked to impress her, but it did not appear that he had succeeded.

'Your son part of your business?' Ruby asked.

'No. He is too respectable. Aren't you, Luc?'

Lucien just smiled. A year since he had seen the old bastard, and already he was goading him. He wasn't going to take the bait.

'What is your business, Luc?' She pronounced it 'Lok'.

'I have a shop in Montparnasse. Asian antiques. Jade. Teak furniture. There are a lot of upper income professionals living in the Left Bank now who appreciate Asian designs and handcrafts.'

Baptiste stifled a theatrical yawn. '*Merde*, I get so excited to hear you talk this way. He has such an exciting life, my son.'

Baptiste took a cigarette from a silver case and lit it. Immediately he broke into a fit of coughing. For a few moments he could not get his breath. When it was over he looked drained. He signalled to the barmaid for two more San Miguels and a Martell for Ruby. 'One good reason to own a bar. I never have to wait for a drink. But you must excuse me. I have to adjourn to the *pissoire*.'

Lucien watched his father stumble as he walked to the toilets at the back of the bar. He knew the real reason his father had excused himself; he had an inhaler in his pocket. He never liked using it in public, even in front of Luc. It was a sign of weakness.

Lucien looked across the table at his companion. She was staring at the video screen on the far wall; a black American rap dancer without a shirt signifying in a Detroit subway. Bizarre.

'What business are you in?' Lucien asked.

The question seemed to bore her. 'Sell computers,' Ruby said.

Yes, I really have impressed this woman, he thought. 'Did you just sell my father one of your computers?'

'Maybe.'

'What sort of computer was it? IBM or Double U-O Globe?'

His reference to Khun Sa's heroin brand did not seem to faze her. 'Nobody buy IBM any more,' she said.

She drank her Martell and contrived a look of *ennui*. He wanted to say or do something to shock her, to make her pay attention to him. 'Are you sleeping with my father?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

For the first time she looked directly at him. 'Did not ask me.'

'Will you sleep with me, then?'

For a moment Ruby made him feel like a cigarette butt she had found in the bottom of her glass. But then she picked up her Gucci purse, and rummaged through the crowded contents. She found what she was looking for; a pair of dice. She slapped them on the table.

'Double six.'

'What?'

'Double six and I sleep with you, okay?'

'This is a joke?'

'Don't know, heya. You joke wif me?'

'No,' he said, his heart thumping. 'I do not make a joke.'

'Okay. Play dice, heya.'

She was serious. He also thought she must be a little crazy. Another of his father's collection of sexual freaks and rogue adventurers. But . . . what the hell.

He rolled the dice across the table. A two and a one. Not even close. Ruby laughed – a throaty growl of triumph – and snatched up the dice. 'Okay, now you pay me a thousand baht.'

'One thousand baht? What for?'

'No pay, no play.'

'Who said I must pay you a thousand baht?'

'Think I will sleep with you for free? This is Bangkok, heya.'

'For a thousand baht you will sleep with me?'

'No! Thousand baht to play dice. Double six to sleep with me!'

'I do not have a thousand baht.'

Ruby raised her eyes to heaven. 'Cheap. Being a shopkeeper not such good business, heya.'

Lucien had never heard himself described as a shopkeeper before. In France he was a businessman, an *homme d'affaires*. His clients were lawyers, stockbrokers and bankers. She made him sound like a man with a sweetshop.

Baptiste came back from the toilets. When he saw Lucien's face he grinned. 'How much do you need?' he said.

Oh, about four hundred thousand francs. 'Papa?'

'No man can spend five minutes with Ruby and she does not figure out some way to cheat him.'

Ruby looked angry. 'One thousand baht,' she said to Baptiste.

Baptiste grinned and reached for his wallet. Lucien shook his head. 'You are going to pay her?'

'Why not, okay? You make the bet, heya.'

'I drop more than that down my cuffs when I get undressed,' Baptiste said. He pushed a bundle of notes across the table. Ruby took them and put them in her purse. She looked at her watch. 'Have to go. Be in touch,' she said, and got up.

She allowed Baptiste to kiss her on both cheeks. He whispered something in her ear and she laughed. Lucien watched her leave. *Bordel de merde*, what an idiot he'd made of himself.

Baptiste slapped him on the shoulder. 'Don't look so miserable, Luc. What did she do to you? Not the dice trick?'

'Trick?'

'The dice in her handbag. They are loaded, weighted on one side. What did you bet with her?'

Lucien shook his head. '*Rien*,' he said. 'It doesn't matter.' Miserable little bitch. Back in Bangkok one day and already he had been duped by a professional con artist. He had always hated Asia. Why did he ever come back?

Baptiste stood up. 'Don't look so fucking miserable. Come on, I will take you to lunch. Not here. The food is pure shit, I should know, I hire the cook myself. *Allons-y!*'

* * *

Out here on the terrace of the Oriental, in the bright afternoon sun, he could see that the years had not been kind to his father. In the year since he had last seen him Baptiste had become painfully thin, and there were hollows in his cheeks where there had never been before. There were even strands of grey in the shock of blue-black hair. He looked ill. The eyepatch he wore over his left eye – a souvenir from his flying days in Laos – appeared loose, where once it had nestled snugly into the flesh of his cheek.

Baptiste put a filtered cigarette between his lips and offered one to Luc. He shook his head. 'What's wrong? Do you want to live for ever?'

'If possible.'

Baptiste grinned. He inhaled deeply and immediately was racked with another fit of coughing.

'You should give these up, papa,' Lucien said.

'I have given up. Because of the doctor. I threw away my good Turkish cigarettes and now I smoke this *merde*. Gitanes. Filtered! Next thing, I will be eating vegetables and drinking orange juice.' He calmed the spasm in his lungs but it left him with an audible wheeze. 'So, how does it go for you in France?'

Lucien hesitated. The moment had arrived. How was he going to tell his father he was a failure? He had started the business with Noelle's money, and his Paris apartment had been paid for by his father. At first all had gone well.

But then, in 1985, he had raised another loan to buy a bigger serviced apartment in St Germain des Prés, and then, on the advice of a stockbroker friend, he had raised another loan against the business to invest in the share market. The Bourse had been hit as hard as the Hang Seng and the Dow Jones in the 1987 downturn and he had been forced to sell his leased BMW and then his apartment, just to keep the business afloat.

It had taken him six years to recover from that almost mortal blow. Several times he had been tempted to take the easy option, to come to Noelle or to his father, knowing they had enough cash to solve his problems tenfold. But his pride would not let him do it. Instead he had worked off the debt, despite a recession that left his clients with little money

to spare for Asian antiques. He had taken on a partner, a former stockbroker who had salvaged some capital from the 1987 débâcle. After six years he was again shopping for real estate and a German car.

Then, just six months ago, his partner had persuaded him to invest in his brother-in-law's research company. He said the company had isolated a new protein compound that could be used in the treatment of burns and open wounds. He was assured that as soon as the shares were floated on the Bourse they could make a vast profit. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Looking to win back the ground he felt he had lost in the last six years, Lucien had gambled heavily, even setting up short-term loans and using funds transferred directly from the business trading account.

Two days before the research company went public Lucien's partner and his brother-in-law disappeared, along with the money. Trading was suspended. The new compound was a complete fiction.

Another failure. He had not finished his degree at the Sorbonne, and now he had twice made a complete fool of himself in business.

'I am thinking of selling up,' he said.

'What you are thinking of, Luc, is liquidating,' Baptiste said. 'Your partner stole nearly four hundred thousand francs, so you do not have much choice. If you find him, I can organise for a friend to break both his legs. If that is what you want.'

Lucien stared at him, numb.

'Once you would have thrown up your hands in horror. Now I see you are tempted. Perhaps you are growing up at last. Life is shit, isn't it?'

'How did you know about . . . what happened?'

Baptiste puffed out his cheeks. 'Luc, I am born in Corsica. The first word I learn is "mama". The second is, "Are you a spy?"

'I can deal with my own problems.'

'That's not true. If you could deal with your own problems you would not lose your business and your money and maybe

your fancy apartment. Which I partly financed. If I remember correctly, your first piece of real estate is a gift I give you when you first left Bangkok.'

'I am sorry, papa.'

Baptiste seemed to regret the outburst. 'Do not be sorry. It is not like you gambled it away.' He leaned back in his chair and lit another cigarette. He coughed again, and immediately slapped his chest with the flat of his hand. 'Fucking pollution.'

Two smiling Thai waitresses brought them Planter's Punches. He sipped his drink and looked at the river. A procession of long wooden skiffs with outboards made their way downstream loaded with rambutans and durian.

'So, Luc, what are we to do, *hein*?'

Lucien could not meet his eyes. 'Can you lend me four hundred thousand francs?'

Baptiste nodded, as if understanding something about his son for the first time. It was what he had wanted to hear and yet, at the same time, it disappointed him. The boy was too soft. But how was he ever going to change him? It was all his mother's doing. 'Yes,' he said.

Lucien had not thought it would be this easy. He waited.

'But I will give you this money only on two conditions. One, you are to stay in Thailand. And two, you are to come and work for me.'

'I have to go back to France, to pay off my debts.'

'If you are here in Bangkok, who cares about those *connards* in Paris? Fuck them. Fuck them and their four hundred thousand francs. It is just pocket money. If a man cannot afford to lose four hundred thousand francs he should not be in business. Are any of these people *milieu*, gangsters?'

Lucien shook his head.

Baptiste made a deprecating gesture with his hands. 'So. No problem.'

Lucien shook his head. 'I cannot do this.'

'Why not?' When Lucien did not answer, Baptiste gave a long sigh. '*Mais oui*. How *is* your mother?' he said.

'She told me you would do this, that you would never give

up. That every time I saw you, you would try to persuade me to stay.'

'Of course! Of course I want you to stay. What does she think I will say? You are my son.' He drew on his cigarette. His face flushed as he suppressed another cough. 'You have a woman in Paris?'

Lucien shook his head. 'No one special.'

'I understand. For myself there is only one special woman in my life.'

Lucien said nothing. The only time his father ever seemed to feel sorry for himself was when he talked about Noelle. Lucien always tried to deflect the conversation around these moods.

'I gave my word to *maman*.'

'You are thirty-one years old. Still your *maman* wipe your bottom, *hein*? Grow up, Luc.'

Lucien looked away. The jibe had hurt.

'What sort of car do you drive now? What sort of house you live in? Let me see your watch.' Baptiste grabbed his arm, glanced at the Seiko on his wrist. 'If your wristwatch is not worth more than a thousand dollars you should not go out in public. Look at how you dress. You should either look a mess and wear gold jewellery, to show you don't give a damn; or else have nice clothes that you pay too much for. See this silk shirt, Lucien? Hand-made. Two hundred US dollars. This suit? Two thousand. Not this cheap sports shirt like you. These beige pants. If you are a rich man you don't wear such shit. So what are you going to do now, Luc? Go back to Paris and grovel to your bank manager?'

Once, Lucien thought, I would have had an answer for him. I had youth and my own irreproachable morals on my side. But that was before I knew what it was like to lose, before I watched friends I knew at university driving in Mercedes motor cars, before I saw expensive apartments, expensive clothes and expensive women slip from my reach because I could not afford them.

'If I stay,' he said, 'what do you want me to do?'

Baptiste's lips compressed in a tight smile of triumph. 'If you stay? If you stay the first thing you must learn is that you

do not need to work so hard to be a success.' He raised his glass in toast. '*Salut*,' he said.

At last, he had won.

He always knew he would.

46

Unlike Luc's father, Noelle had aged with grace and charm. At fifty-four she still had the poise of her youth. There were a few grey tips to her hair, he noticed now, but she still retained her svelte figure. Sensuality had given way to serenity. Perhaps a testament to a good life, he thought; as far as he knew her only vice was that she occasionally smoked opium.

The bamboo and ivory pipes on the teak dresser were supposed to be an ornamental collection, but Lucien knew that sometimes they still saw use. He could detect the pungent taint of the opium in the room, mixed with the sweeter scents of lavender and bougainvillea from the neatly groomed garden.

Noelle fetched him a Thai whisky mixed with soda water and a squeeze of lime. She always restricted herself to orange juice.

There were two couches upholstered with dark blue silk in the living room. She took his arm and they sat down together, side by side.

'It is so good to see you again, Luc. Perhaps next year I must save you this journey and come to France.'

'That would be wonderful,' Lucien said, and hoped his eyes did not betray him. Last night, when they had returned from the airport, she had asked him all her questions and he had parried them as best he could. Some time, of course, he would have to tell her he was almost bankrupt. But not yet.

His father was wrong. He did not want her to clean up his shit; he didn't even want her to see it. For the first time he felt a painful resentment of her for expecting so much of him. To be honest, to be successful, to be something she could be proud of. He had started the business with her money; now it was all gone. He was angry with her for that. If it was his

own money, perhaps he could have at least owned his own failure. Now he did not even have that.

From somewhere a parrot squawked raucously in the palms.

'You saw your father today?'

'We had lunch.'

Noelle's eyes were unreadable. 'How is he?'

'Still smokes and drinks too much.' He grinned. 'The old fox will probably live to be a hundred, I suppose.'

'He has emphysema,' Noelle said.

Lucien felt the blood drain out of his face. 'What's that?'

'It means his lungs are turning to concrete. Two doctors have told him this. But he does not believe them. He thinks if he ignores this thing, it will go away.' She sipped her juice. 'We all have our addiction. The tobacco companies only do to him what he has done many times to others with another kind of drug.'

'Is it serious?'

She shrugged her shoulders: she did not give a damn. 'It will not kill him. Not yet. It simply makes his life uncomfortable. They tell me he has an oxygen cylinder in his bedroom. I think it must be a little jarring with all those mirrors.' Noelle sounded bitter and she realised it. 'Listen to me. I still love him. A part of me anyway. I only love two men in all my life and both of them are major shits.' She looked fondly at Lucien. 'Three men.'

The question of Lucien's true nature hung unanswered between them.

Lucien tried to absorb this new information. His father had always seemed indestructible. What if he died? His world, the world of the *milieu*, had always been there for him, hidden in the shadows, a last bolt-hole should everything else fail. Whether he would one day venture there was a teasing game he sometimes played with himself. At the Sorbonne he had been endowed with a referred glamour by letting it be known that his father was a gangster.

But if Baptiste died . . . if he died there would be no possible entré then to that world and all its dark secrets. No last chance for the millions he had promised himself would

one day be his. The cars. The women. The secret accounts in Switzerland.

He wondered, not for the first time, if his father would leave all his money to him. Then he would have the fruits without the planting. His hands would be clean. But he had already decided it was unlikely. He had defied his father all his life, he had sided with Noelle over him. The money was Baptiste's only leverage. So like him to leave the money in Zürich, in some banker's vault, to moulder there for centuries, his last joke on the world.

Or donate it all to a drug rehabilitation centre in Marseille.

No way of knowing, or finding out, what he would do.

'He never mentioned to me that he was sick.'

'Of course not. For him it is not reality.'

Lucien sipped his drink and felt the future slipping from his control. He had already decided to renege on the vague commitment he had made to his father a few hours before. Now the doubts were there again. Had he ever really made the decision to go against his father over Noelle? No, he decided, all I ever did was delay it.

'And how are things with you, *maman*?'

'I still have my business. My garden. My memories.'

'Memories! You talk as if you are an old woman. You are still only young.'

'Perhaps I am not yet ready for a walking-stick, but fifty-one years old is not young, Luc. What will you have me do? I do not want another man, all I have ever had from any man is pain. I have a pet monkey instead. You have not met him yet. He is called Coco. I'll take you into the garden in a moment and introduce you. He is just like having a husband. He has the same disgusting habits – he even tries to fellate himself, which your father would have done, if he could – but the only difference, he does not try to run away from me when he is bored. But that is only because I keep him on a chain.' She smiled at her own venom. 'I am sorry. I never think about that *connard* except when you come home. And then I become a bitch again.'

'It is all right.'

'So, you see, I have a quiet life. Every morning I visit my

three shops and make sure my managers are not trying to cheat me, I take my lunch at the Alliance Française with some friends, then in the afternoon I play tennis at the Cercle Sportif. At night . . .'

'At night?'

She smiled. 'Night in Bangkok is for men. That is why I stay home.'

He took a deep breath. 'What will you think of me if . . . if I say I might . . . perhaps come back to Bangkok . . . just for a while.'

She stared at him. 'And why will you do that?'

He shrugged. 'I was born in Asia. I miss it.'

'You were born in Laos nearly thirty-two years ago. Such a place cannot exist any more. This is a different Asia now.' She paused, and he felt her eyes on him. 'Baptiste,' she said.

'It is nothing to do with papa,' he lied.

'Yesterday you ask me how I can live in Bangkok. You are transformed suddenly.'

'It is just . . . business is not so good. I am bored with it. Perhaps I need a new start.'

'You come back here, you will be corrupted. Like everything is corrupted here. Stay in France.'

Lucien thought about what he had already agreed with his father. If she wanted him to stay away from Baptiste, perhaps she would have to clean up his shit, after all.

'I suppose you are right,' he lied.

Surveillance was never an easy job to do well, the American thought. But in Bangkok it was easy. You just sat behind your target in the choked-up traffic and hammered your fist on the horn and tried to squeeze in front or alongside them at every conceivable opportunity. That way you blended into the scenery.

David Lee was an American-born Chinese, a fifteen-year veteran of the DEA in Thailand. But in his cheap cotton shirt and jeans, sitting behind the wheel of a black Nissan taxi, with a member of the Thai Narcotics Suppression Unit in the back seat in a suit and tie, he knew he could not have appeared less suspicious.

The rush hour snarl of traffic on Yaowarat Road had him bumper to bumper with his target for twenty minutes. All that time David Lee wondered if the car boot in front of him contained ten or twenty keys of heroin. He would never know. His job today was just to follow and watch.

He followed the Mercedes on to Rama IV Road. Without warning his target pulled across a line of traffic and accelerated down a laneway. Had she suspected something or was she just a professional taking precautions? He called up his motorcycle back-up on the radio. The rider weaved between the stalled cars in pursuit but Ruby Wen had gone.

The girl wore sunglasses, cowboy boots, and one leather glove. There was a chain around her waist, but little else. She was dancing on the small stage behind the bar, her arms around the chrome pillar, rubbing her crotch sinuously up and down the metal. The sound system pounded out U2's *Lemon*.

On a bar stool directly below her a drunken Dutch boy had his arms around a Thai girl in a clinging electric-pink dress. He put his hand up the back of the dress and grabbed at her bottom. The girl was angry but did not show it. A customer was a customer. She took the chewing gum out of her mouth and stuck it to the boy's jeans, pretending to fondle him.

A group of middle-aged German women came in, led by a Thai guide, on a Bangkok Night Tour. Patpong had become just another tourist destination, like the Wat Pra Keo and Jim Thompson's house.

Lucien sat in a booth with his father and Ruby Wen. Baptiste and Ruby were talking in Cantonese, which Lucien did not understand. His father had been in Asia most of his adult life, and spoke Thai, English, Cantonese, understood the *chiu chao* dialect, could even converse with some of the Hmong hill tribes.

Ruby excused herself to go to the toilets, a unisex arrangement at the back of the bar.

'What were you talking about with her?' Lucien asked his father.

'Business.'

'What sort of business?'

Baptiste shrugged. 'I am selling. She is buying.'

Lucien studied him; the eye patch, the cigarette, the rings on his fingers. My father; the pirate, the rogue, the racketeer. 'Why do you do it, papa? You do not need the money any more.'

'A long time since I did it for the money, you are right. But it is the game, Luc.' He rubbed his thumb and index finger together. 'It is the deal.'

'What if you are arrested?'

Baptiste looked contemptuous. 'In Thailand?'

'What about the Americans?'

'Fuck the Americans. All my life I have to endure the Americans in Asia. I spit on the Americans!'

As a Frenchman, it was a sentiment that Lucien concurred with. But they were unpredictable and they had to be respected.

'I thought the Chinese had the business all sewn up,' Lucien said. He had kept a scholarly interest in the narcotics industry, even after he left Thailand for France. He knew the break-up of what the Americans called the French Connection had less to do with American police work than Pompidou moving against the Corsican mafia, the *milieu*, who were opposing him in France. He had heard that around that time his father had lost many of his contacts in Europe and the United States and had ceased to be a major player.

Soon afterwards the American Mafia held a summit on Staten Island in New York and resolved to resume the drug traffic they had abandoned in the fifties. But now they bought directly from the Chinese criminal gangs, who could purchase and refine the drug in the Golden Triangle itself. Men like Baptiste had to buy at a much higher price in Vientiane and Bangkok, and were squeezed out of the big time.

'I still know a few people,' Baptiste said.

Lucien took a deep breath. 'I do not think I can do what you do, papa,' he said.

Baptiste gave his son a look of pity and scorn. 'I have this same conversation with your mother many times,' he said. 'She lives in Asia all her life, still she does not understand.

Perhaps you should be more like the Thai. He is too poor to have a conscience. He understands this world is a bad place, everyone is trying to cheat you. But he has to live. No choice. His only protection is to be more clever, more richer, more powerful than anyone else. The Thai has no sympathy for the man who is cheated. He is just stupid.' He drew on his cigarette. 'The Land of Smiles, they call this place, *hein*? They do not understand, this politeness, this cheating, all comes from the same attitude. It is a wicked world, you have to keep it at a distance, to protect yourself. Either you become a cheat yourself, or you withdraw, you be polite, show a cool heart. Either way, you know you cannot win in this world.

'See that girl, dancing on the bar. Noi. At night she sleeps with any man who asks her, for money. She is a prostitute, *hein*? But tomorrow she will give some of the money to a monk, and the rest she sends to her family in the north, so they can buy food. Is she bad, is she evil? No, she is a good Buddhist. Like me. I sell a little drugs, maybe, I have to cheat, have to sometimes give orders that someone cannot live no more. But I am still a good Catholic, good family man. You understand?'

Lucien stared at his father, not sure if he did understand.

Baptiste leaned closer. 'How do you want to live, Luc?' he said, his voice low and urgent over the thumping bass of the music. 'You want beautiful girls, beautiful house, a nice life? Or you want to be honest?'

Ruby returned and the question was left unanswered.

Baptiste turned towards her, and the intensity dropped away from him; he became once more the charming *bon vivant*. 'Lucien thinks he will stay in Bangkok,' he said to her, in English this time.

Ruby shrugged. This was of no interest to her. She lit a cigarette, her elbow supported with her other hand.

'My son will like to be part of my business.'

Ruby raised an eyebrow.

'I know what you are thinking. What does he know about running a bar, right?' Another fiction. Baptiste employed managers to run the Patpong bar, his other bars in Pattaya and Vientiane, the coffee shop in Chiang Mai, the company

that exported jade, and the freight company at the airport. 'Maybe one day you have to do your business with Luc.'

This seemed to stir Ruby from her torpor.

An Australian had jumped on the bar and was trying to dance with one of the girls. The bar manager was trying to persuade him to get down. The girl in the cowboy boots was giggling, embarrassed.

'You like cocks, heya?' Ruby said.

Lucien blinked. Was she laughing at him?

'Cocks?'

'Ever go to cockfight?'

'A couple of times. I do not like it.'

'Why not?' When he did not answer, she said. 'Got a car, okay?'

Baptiste reached into his jacket pocket and threw his car keys on the table. 'Take mine. Go on, Luc.' And he added, in French. 'Have a good time. Ruby's a good girl. She'll look after you.' He was grinning at him.

Part of the sales pitch, Lucien realised. He had already arranged this with Ruby. He could imagine the conversation: show my boy a good time. Give him a good reason to stay here in Bangkok.

Ruby stood up. She looked down at Lucien: Are you coming with me or not? Baptiste took out his cigarette case and lit another Gitanes. '*Bon chance*,' he said.

47

Ruby directed him across the Taksin bridge into Thonburi, on the western side. After half an hour they came to a cluster of wooden shanties perched on planks over a stinking *klong*. Lucien parked Baptiste's red Mercedes at the side of the dirt road and got out. The air was ripe with the smell of excrement and after the cold air conditioning of the sports car the warm tropical night brought a sheen of sweat to his skin.

'Here?' Lucien said. He was already a little afraid.

Ruby ignored him, picking her way through the potholes and rubbish on the street, stepping daintily in her black leather pumps. Lucien could hear noise coming from somewhere close by, the sound of a crowd, like a soccer game. Ruby stopped and turned, her hands on her hips.

'Going to stand there all night, heya?'

Dusk had settled over Bangkok, the polluted air veiled with orange and violet. Two naked children watched them from the doorway of one of the shacks. Lucien shrugged and followed her.

She led him down a narrow alley to a large tin shed. They were close to the noise now. Ruby pushed her way inside. It was baking hot inside, a hundred sweating Thais pressed around a dirt arena, no more than ten metres square. The air was thick with cheap cigarettes and there was a faint butcher's shop aroma, the smell of blood. Some men had climbed up the teak poles to get a better view. Everyone was shouting. A few eyes turned towards them as they walked in, a mixture of suspicion and curiosity, but then the action in the arena diverted attention away again.

The two owners were in the ring, holding their fighting cocks firmly around the body. An associate thrust another cock towards one of the fighters, making it so aggressive it

tried to leap from its owner's hands to peck at its tormentor. Lucien could see that both the fighting birds had razor-sharp metal slashers fixed to the spurs on their legs.

The spectators seemed to be thrusting money at each other in a bedlam of shouting and waving. A few said nothing. Eye contact was made with a betting partner, there were hand signals and a nod, and the deal was done. A lot of the action close by seemed to revolve around a fat man with a wet hand-rolled cigarette between his lips, thick bundles of notes stuffed in the pocket of his shirt.

'Give me one thousand baht,' Ruby said.

'What for?'

'Going to make bet for you. No point to come if you don't bet.'

'Bet with your own money,' Lucien said.

'Kind of man are you, heya?' she hissed at him. 'Take a girl to a cockfight and don't make bet for her, same as take girl to a bar and don't buy her drink. Baptiste know you are a cheap Charley, okay?'

Lucien reached into his shirt pocket and took out two five-hundred-baht notes. He handed them to Ruby who snatched them away and disappeared into the crowd. He saw her arguing with the man with the hand-rolled cigarette. The crowd noise had swollen to a roar.

The fight was about to start.

Lucien peered into the ring. One of the cocks had just one eye, he saw, probably a scar from a previous fight. It was fatter than the other, and it had a sprinkling of golden feathers along its wings. 'Which way did you bet?' he asked Ruby when she came back.

'One-eyed chicken. Bet on this one many times, never can lose.'

The fight started. A scream rose from a hundred throats as the two cocks attacked each other, circling, darting into the air, scrabbling at each other with beaks and spurs. In nature, cocks lash out with their spurred legs to drive a rival from their territory, not usually inflicting serious injury. But when a cock owner affixes a razor to the cock's legs he allows it, unaware, to deliver fatal injuries.

Already the one-eyed bird seemed to be getting the worst of it. It was heavier, but it was slower, perhaps older.

The fight did not last long, no more than thirty seconds. The other bird was a ground fighter. It darted in, managed to grip the one-eyed bird with its beak, and delivered a few powerful blows with its spurs. The injured bird tried to retreat, its beak torn, blood flecked along its wing and breast. The other pounced again, pecking at its twitching body, the steel spurs on its legs doing terrible damage. The referee called the fight over and the owners ran in to retrieve their birds.

'Give me five thousand baht,' Ruby said.

Lucien's shirt was soaked with sweat. His mouth was gummy dry. He felt sickened. 'What for?'

'Have to win our money back,' she said.

But they did not win their money back. Ruby lost four times and won only once. On that occasion she did not give him his winnings.

'Cheap Charley,' she said to him, when she held out her hand and he refused to give her any more money.

'I lose five hundred dollars here tonight. That is more money than some of these people will see in one year. Do not call me cheap.'

'Spend more than that on clothes in one week. Take me home now, okay.'

They picked their way back through the darkness to the car. Kerosene lamps in the doorways of some of the houses helped them find their way. Once Lucien felt his heel ooze into something soft underfoot, mud perhaps, but he did not stop to investigate. They reached the car. The noise from the crowd at the cockfight was muted now.

They got in, and Lucien started the engine.

'Really going to stay in Bangkok?' she said.

'Perhaps.'

'More better you go back to France, I think.'

Lucien was stung. What did he care what this greedy little Cantonese bitch thought of him? He reached into his pocket and took out two five-baht coins. He held them behind his back, then placed both fists, palm down, in the air in front of her.

'You like to bet? I have a bet for you, *trou du cul*,' he added in harsh French.

Ruby reached into her purse and took out her Dunhill cigarettes. She lit one and blew out the smoke in a long stream. He remembered what his mother had said once, referring to his father. *The trouble with tobacco is, it doesn't work fast enough.*

'What bet?'

'You pick the hand with the coin, I drive you home. Pick the wrong hand, you walk.'

'You bullshit me.'

'Don't bullshit you, heya,' he said, mimicking her. 'We are only half a mile from Charoen Nakhorn Road. You can get a taxi from there. If you do not get raped on the way.'

Ruby touched his left hand. He opened his other hand, and showed her the five-baht coin. Then he got out of the car, walked around and opened the door.

'Out.'

'No more joke,' Ruby said. 'Drive me home now.'

Lucien reached in, grabbed her arm and pulled her out. *Merde alors*, it's as black as a bear's ass round here, he thought. He heard two men say something in Thai, nearby, heard laughter. But the headlights of the Mercedes showed only an empty laneway, a bare-ribbed dog and a pile of rotting plastic bottles.

He pushed her away from the car.

'Have my friends break your leg for this, you piece of dog vomit!' She sounded scared.

'Double or nothing,' Lucien said.

Ruby drew on her cigarette. It glowed in the darkness. He heard the crackle of the tobacco.

He pulled her back into the flood of the headlights. 'You win, I take you home. You lose, you sleep with me tonight.'

Ruby shucked her bag higher on her shoulder and threw her cigarette in the mud. 'Okay.'

He put his hands behind his back, then drew them forward.

'Right hand.'

He opened it. Empty.

'You lose,' he said.

He pushed Ruby back into the car, slamming the door.

Lucien climbed in beside her. 'Where to?' he said.

'Wireless Road,' Ruby said. She lit another cigarette. Her hands were shaking.

Lucien smiled.

Ruby lived in a six-storey apartment block off the Soi Langsuan, a stone's throw from Lumpini Park. The electric-blue water of a kidney-shaped pool was illuminated by floodlights slung from surrounding banana palms. Lucien parked in an underground garage between a black MGB and a grey Mercedes saloon.

They rode the elevator to the fifth floor, with some Lufthansa air crew. Lucien assumed one of them had an apartment in the same block. When they got out on the third floor he heard the faint thump of rock music from one of the apartments. A party.

Ruby's apartment was on the fifth floor.

They rode the rest of the way in silence and walked down an open corridor that overlooked the pool. Ruby opened the door and they went inside.

The place was furnished with the intimacy of a motel room; chrome and leather. No clothes scattered about, no photographs, no notes on the refrigerator, no china drying on the sink. This is just the place where she parks her clothes, Lucien thought.

She took his hand and led him to the bedroom.

Ruby turned on a lamp and threw her crocodile-skin purse on the bedside table. The blinds were open, the tall white spire of the Dusit Thani hotel reached into the night.

She looked at him, waited. Lucien felt his assurance slip away. He remembered what his father had told him once. 'You know how you give a Cantonese girl an orgasm? You pin a hundred dollar note to her pillow and make her concentrate on it.' Out of the exotic surroundings of his father's bar and the cock fight, she was as alluring as chrome.

'Going to stand here all night, heya?'

'I win the bet. I can do what I want.'

She folded her arms, elaborately tapping her index finger on her forearm. 'Bet is just to sleep wif me, heya. Not to do just what you want. That is another bet, okay.' She took off her chiffon scarf and threw it on the pillow. She sat down on the bed and reached for her purse, fumbling in the zipped pocket for her dice.

She cupped them in her palm. 'You win, you tie my hands, do anything you want. I win, I tie your hands. Do anything I want. Okay?'

Lucien hesitated.

'Don't want to gamble now, Frenchie? Care too much, too frighten? No ginger, not like your father. You think maybe you cannot be like him? Maybe you are right, Frenchie.'

'The name's Luc.'

She held the dice in her palm and shook them, her smile mocking him. 'Think because you cheat me with your cheap trick I will love you too much, lick you all up like cream. Come on, Frenchie. Maybe you are lucky again this time.'

Lucien hesitated, excited and scared. He realised he was aroused by the uncertainty, the danger.

'Frighten of one little Chinese girl, heya?'

He snatched the dice out of her hands, rolled them onto the bedside table. A four and a three. Seven.

Ruby picked up the dice, held them in both hands, her eyes on his. 'What you want it to be?' she whispered. 'Want to win, or you want to lose?' She let the dice fall on the table. 'Think maybe you want to lose.'

Double six.

Ruby put her hands behind her and leaned back on the bed. He felt her eyes watching him intently, like a scientist watching an experiment, both critical and curious. 'You run away now?' she said.

'If I let you . . . what will you do?'

Ruby grinned. 'No fun to gamble if you know what will happen.' She picked up the scarf and coiled it between her fingers. 'No such thing as safe sex, heya.'

His hands were shaking. He took a deep breath. He was aware of Ruby's perfume, the smooth muscles of her thighs

as she crossed her legs, one leg swinging as she waited for him to make his decision.

'I tie your hands what you think I will do, Luc?' she said, her voice very low he could barely hear her. She leaned forward, so that the neck of her dress fell open just a little, affording him a glimpse of the cleft between her small breasts.

He went over to the window, looked out, knowing he had already made up his mind. He kicked off his shoes and sat down on the bed.

Ruby twisted around, kneeling on the bedcover. She pushed him back onto the pillow, looped one end of the scarf around his wrist and tied it, then looped the free end around one of the chrome uprights of the bedhead. He allowed her to put his other arm above his head, felt her secure his other wrist.

It was electrifying to have made the decision. He remembered the other big gambles of his life; the stockmarket in '87, the shares in the research company. Both times he had lost, lost terribly. Yet he still found himself yearning for that same cold fire in his belly, the terror and exhilaration he had felt then. Now Ruby had recreated those same feelings again.

His chest was so tight he thought he was suffocating. His arms were shaking. Ruby straddled him, sitting across his belly. 'Pretty crazy gamble you make,' she said. 'Maybe Ruby like you after all.'

She started to unbutton his shirt, pressed a long scarlet fingernail down the middle of his chest. It left a tiny red welt.

Her hips moved, sinuously. 'Like that, baby? Like riding an iron bar, heya.' She slid down, unbuckled his belt and shucked his slacks down over his hips. She wet the tips of her fingers with her tongue. 'Make you wet now for me,' she whispered. 'Make it very easy. Slide you inside like hot butter.'

Lucien groaned and closed his eyes. It had never been like this, nothing he had ever done with a woman had ever been quite like this. Ruby wet her fingers again, and again, and again. Over and over. *Nom de Dieu!*

Almost instinctively, he tried to move his hands, grab her and stop this sweet torment, take back control. The scarf bit

into his wrists. She was smiling at him, and her eyes did not leave his face. She wet her fingers again.

'Please,' he said.

'Not yet. Got to be ready, baby.' She slipped into a high-pitched Suzy Wong voice. 'Too big for little chinee girl, heya.'

'Ruby . . .'

'What your hurry, Frenchie?'

'Please.'

Her fingers slid under her skirt. Now she was seeking her own pleasure. Lucien watched her, mesmerised. No smile now, she was breathing faster, her lips trembling slightly. She licked her fingers again, slid her hand between her legs, leaning over him, one hand on the pillow beside his head. Her face was inches from his, he could feel her breath on his face; the only things that existed for him now were her perfume and the terrible aching tension in his body.

'Going to be soon,' Ruby said.

'Please.'

'Want Ruby real bad, heya?' She sounded breathless.

'Please!'

'Lotus flower ready for you. Clouds burst very soon.' She sat up. With one hand she slipped aside the crotch of her briefs, with the other she guided him inside her. Lucien cried out with relief. Ruby gripped his hips and moved in time with her own need.

'Take off your dress,' he whispered.

Ruby shook her head.

'Take it off,' he repeated. But the scarf held his hands.

Ruby's eyes were locked with his. He saw her expression change, felt the urgency of her rhythm. She cried out once and a shudder passed through her body. She threw back her head, gasping in air, and then leaned forward, drained.

Lucien felt close, very close. He tried to move with her, but she slid forward, her hands resting on his shoulders.

'Ruby!'

'Still wif the gods,' she whispered.

'Ruby, please!'

He was outside her now. He strained against her with his

hips, but she moved; he tried to kiss her but she turned her face away from him, laughing. She rolled off him and reached for the dice on the edge of the bed.

'What are you doing?'

'Look like you gonna burst, baby. Never see anything so big. You do damage down there.'

Panic. Lucien jerked on the scarf around his wrists. Anger and need boiled over inside him. Suddenly he understood the game.

'Give you one more chance, like you give me. More than seven, I finish you. Any way you want. Okay?'

Lucien groaned and closed his eyes. 'You bitch.'

He felt her roll the dice on his chest, heard her suck in her breath. 'Gotta look. Don't look, I don't do.'

He raised his head. The bone dice were nestled among the dark hairs on his chest. A two and a five.

'Need more than seven to win. You lose, okay.'

Ruby stood up, smoothed down her dress, picked up her crocodile-skin bag.

'Where are you going?'

'Still early, baby. Got to win back what I lose tonight. Maybe go to Chinatown, find game of *pai gau*. Can take you, maybe, but you look like you are all tied up.' Her cheeks were flushed, her climax had left her exhilarated, not at all tired. She bent down and kissed his swollen penis with the careless affection of kissing a small child's head. 'Maybe see you tomorrow,' she said.

'Ruby!'

Lucien fought the knots at his wrist, kicked frantically with his legs. *Nom de Dieu de bordel de merde!*

Ruby gave him a little wave. 'Call you,' she said, and then she was gone. He heard the door click shut. She was gone.

Lucien lay awake long into the night. Excitement and fear competed for his attention. He knew this particular game was not yet over. And there was the physical torment; the ache in his groin was unbearable.

Finally he drifted into a fitful sleep. It may have been minutes, or hours. When he woke a dirty, purple dawn

had stained the sky. The room was chill and he started to shiver.

He tried not to think about her not coming back. No, that was absurd. But the uncertainty kept him afraid.

He drifted to half-sleep again, was woken by the sound of the key turning in the front-door lock.

'Ruby!'

Ruby's housemaid stood in the doorway, her face an inscrutable mask. She was a Thai, a small, round woman with a pleasant smile.

'Ruby telephone,' she said, in halting English. 'Say me clean up now.'

They stared at each other. There was a long silence.

'You want I help you?' she said, finally.

48

Lumpini boxing stadium

The two boxers circled each other, barefoot, darting in and out to deliver blows with their feet. Their brown and lean bodies glistened with sweat. The gongs and drums rose to a crescendo, but neither boxer seemed to be gaining the upper hand. To Ruby, it seemed less a blood sport than a test of physical endurance. She had bet ten thousand baht on the boy in the blue silk shorts, a handsome and well-muscled young man, using sexual attractiveness as her form guide. If it was her joss, and his, he would win.

At the end of the round she looked up and saw a group of four well-dressed men moving along the wooden stand towards her. It was the smallest of the men, a jovial and smooth-skinned Thai, that captured her attention.

It was Louis Huu.

He sat down and his bodyguards took up their positions around him on the hard wooden benches. 'Ruby-ah,' Louis Huu beamed. 'This is a very great surprise to see you in Bangkok.'

He followed me here tonight, Ruby decided. He has probably had me followed ever since I arrived in Thailand.

'You are lucky?' he said.

'I choose the one in the blue shorts,' she said, 'but I think he is going to lose.'

Louis shrugged. 'Never bet on people, Ruby-ah. Can never trust people. I only trust horses.'

'Horses are okay, but they have people riding them. Last horse I back, the jockey has the brains of a monkey and is disqualified.'

Louis laughed. 'I remember. Happy Valley. That was

most unfortunate. So, what are you doing in Bangkok, Ruby-ah?'

'A little business.'

'A little business for Eddie Lau? Don't look so shocked. You can tell me.'

'Do business for a lot of people.'

Louis Huu's demeanour changed suddenly, like the sun going behind a cloud. 'Where is he?' he hissed at her.

Told Eddie this would happen, heya! Ruby felt a stab of fear in her stomach. But nowhere to run. Louis Huu had his muscle all around her, could kill her right here if they wanted, no one to help Ruby Wen in Bangkok.

'Do not know where he is. Swear this is the truth.'

Louis Huu laughed, unexpectedly. 'Ruby Wen would not know the truth if it had a sign around its neck in big red characters.'

'Just a simple businesswoman.'

'Where is he?'

'Do not know where he is.'

Louis sighed, puffing out his cheeks. He looked sad, as if he had done his best to help. 'Got a lot of friends in this place, Ruby-ah. How many friends you got? One day perhaps you will need Louis Huu.'

'Good to have a lot of friends.'

'Yes, good to have friends, Ruby-ah. Most of all, good to have friends like me. But you will discover this for yourself. Then perhaps you will tell me where I can find Eddie Lau.' He leaned closer. She could smell his breath; lemongrass, brandy, rich tobacco. 'Hear you owe a lot of money in Bangkok. Three hundred thousand. Another good reason to have friends, Ruby-ah.'

Ruby felt the blood drain from her cheeks. How could Louis Huu know about her gambling debts?

The music was starting again, the two boxers returned to the contest in the centre of the ring. Louis Huu stood up and made his way back along the aisle, followed by his bodyguards. Ruby watched him leave with a mixture of dread and relief.

She was unharmed. For now. But perhaps he had some other plan for her, something maybe very much worse, heya?

* * *

The sun slid down the sky, sinking into the violet haze of dusk. On Patpong the day shift surrendered to the night shift, the open air noodle shops set up their tables and chairs on the pavement, and the girls climbed out of the *tuk-tuks* to start work in the massage parlours and bars and sex shows. Danish and German tourists wandered down the streets, rested and ready for another night of easy sex. The neon flickered on and the bass of rock music thudded into the street.

When Lucien appeared in 69's the Thai bar manager recognised him and immediately brought him a bottle of San Miguel. His father had still not arrived. Lucien sat on a stool to wait. He had made up his mind. Tonight he would tell his father he was going back to France.

He had given his word to Noelle that he would never be a part of Baptiste's dirty world. His father could try and turn his head with his fake philosophy – what Noelle called his Nüremberg defence – and perhaps there was even some truth to it. It was a seductive argument and sometimes Lucien felt like a man with vertigo being drawn to the edge of a tall building. If he ventured too close, his own fears might persuade him to jump.

There were still only a few people in the bar. Two bar girls, in their leotards, were smoking cigarettes and drinking Cokes through straws, two Germans were arguing about their national soccer team. He noticed the silhouette of a woman sitting alone in one of the darkened alcoves at the rear.

She rose to her feet and walked over, a purse on a long golden chain slung over one arm.

'What are you doing here?' he said, bitterly.

'Waiting for you, heya,' Ruby said.

'For me?'

'Still mad at me, Frenchie?'

'Maybe I will break your neck.'

'Buy me a drink, baby?'

'Don't call me that,' he said, but he nodded to the barman, who fetched another whisky and soda.

'No reason to get mad. Best time you ever have wif a girl, I bet.'

'Shame that it finishes half-way through.'

'You *gwailo*. Always want to hurry, hurry. Quick time, heya.'

'Oh sure. Quick time. Three days.'

Ruby swallowed half her drink in one swallow. 'Okay, you lend me three hundred thousand baht,' she said.

Lucien just stared at her.

'Is not so much money. Never ask you if not very important.'

Lucien could not find the right words. He felt outraged. First she lost all his money at the cock fight, then she tormented and humiliated him, now she had the effrontery to demand this outrageous sum of money.

'I really look this stupid?'

Ruby looked down, lowered her voice. 'Lose money, big money, at *pai gau*. Somebody chop me if I do not pay back. Want to see me dead, baby?'

'Yes.'

'Is not much money. Your father biggest gangster of every *farang* in Bangkok.'

'Then why don't you ask him?'

'He will never lend me three baht, never mind three hundred thousand.'

'Then why do you come to me?'

'Got no one else.'

Patently a lie, Lucien thought. She had come to him because she thought he was stupid, thought he was a soft mark. Baptiste's soft, spoiled son. Thinks with his stalk.

'Maybe I can be your girlfriend,' she said.

'Three hundred thousand baht is expensive for short time, Ruby.'

She looked up at him, her eyes bright and furious. 'Not bit of dirt,' she said. 'Not trash like bar girl. I mean proper girlfriend. Can show you, okay?'

He shook his head.

She stroked his arm. 'I know you just pretend to be angry. But you cannot forget your Ruby-ah, okay?'

'Just go away,' he said.

She tossed the dice on the bar. A five and a two.

'Maybe this time you win.'

'Forget it.'

'You win, you come home with Ruby-ah. I be your good girlfriend. You lose, then even.'

He picked up the dice and tossed them contemptuously across the bar. Double six.

Ruby hailed a *tuk-tuk* to take them back to her apartment on Wireless Road. When they got there she pushed him into the shower. When he came out she handed him a whisky and soda with ice and lime juice.

'Wait in there,' she said, and led him into the bedroom.

He sat on the bed, listened to the shower running. Ruby was right. For three days he had not thought about anything else but her. She was unpredictable, exotic, dangerous. Everything he had always been told to avoid.

She walked into the bedroom, naked, except for her black leather pumps and a tiny gold chain around her left ankle. Her slim body gleamed with oil, every muscle perfectly defined. There was no hair on her body anywhere.

She knelt between his legs and pulled away the towel. *Nom de Dieu de bordel de merde.* His penis felt like iron. She pushed him back on the bed, and her tongue fluttered along his shaft like a thousand butterflies. He groaned aloud.

'You *gwailo*,' she murmured. 'Always in such a hurry.'

They lay sprawled across the wreck of the bed, the sheets soaked with their sweat. Ruby had her head resting on his chest, listening to the banging of the blood in his heart.

'Go back to France now, heya?' she whispered.

'I don't know,' he said. His tongue felt too large for his mouth. There was a buzzing in his head. He just wanted to sleep.

'Not be happy there, okay. You enjoy too much in Bangkok. Maybe more like your father than you think.'

The words he had ached to hear. I have tried to be the

man Noelle wanted, he thought. But the man I wanted to be was Baptiste.

'Go back to France and all you think about is Ruby–ah.'

'Wouldn't . . . bet on . . . that,' he murmured.

'Ruby bet on everything.'

He drifted away, into the fuzzy red cloud of gelatin that filled his head.

'I don't get three hundred thousand baht by tomorrow night, they chop me,' she said.

Lucien woke, his head pulsing with pain. The blinds were open and the light hurt his eyes. He groped on the floor for his watch. It took him a long time to focus. Eight o'clock. He had been asleep for nearly ten hours.

'Ruby?'

He sat upright with a groan. The bedroom came into focus; the stained sheets, his clothes crumpled on the floor. 'Ruby?'

He staggered to the bathroom. She was gone.

He stood under a cold shower for five minutes, then stumbled back to the bedroom and got into his clothes. He wondered when Ruby had left. He had slept the sleep of the damned.

Merde alors! He fumbled through his jacket for his wallet.

Empty.

Last night he had had almost forty thousand baht. How could he have been so stupid? He grabbed the glass off the bedside table, sniffed at the contents. There was a fine sludge of white powder at the bottom.

The little bitch! She had made a complete fool of him again.

You idiot, he said, over and over. *You idiot!*

He sat down to wait, and a cold and deadly anger settled over him.

He heard a key in the latch. Perhaps just the housemaid. At least this time she would not have to untie him and let him out of the flat.

Footsteps in the hall. He turned around.

It was Ruby. Her clothes reeked of smoke and sweat, and there were dark rings under her eyes. She staggered a little from fatigue.

He got to his feet.

'I am going to kill you,' he said, feeling very calm.

Ruby's face split into a broad grin. She reached into her purse, and pulled out a handful of five-hundred-baht notes. She showered them in the air, then ran across the room, leaped in the air and threw her arms around his neck. She kissed him roughly on the mouth.

'Love you too much,' she whispered, breathlessly. 'Save my life.'

'My money,' he said.

'Win it all back for you,' she said, as if she had done him a special favour. 'Play *pai gau* all night and win too much big. You save my life.' She kissed him again, softer this time, her mouth open. 'Got special present for you,' she said, and hooked her legs around his hips. 'Want to rock your girlfriend to sleep, heya?'

49

Baptiste's villa was off Sukhumwit Soi 71, hidden away behind banana palms and a high white-washed wall, its top embedded with broken glass. Lucien had borrowed his mother's Mercedes. An unsmiling blond man in a white T-shirt and jeans, a hand-held radio tucked into the back of the jeans, waved him through a pair of high barred gates.

The driveway was lined with waist-high hedges, hibiscus and birds of paradise flowers ablaze in the garden beds. Lucien parked the car and went up the steps to the portico. The house was white stucco, built in the style of a French villa with a wide portico and green shuttered windows. Two garudas, each carved from solid pieces of mahogany, stood guard on either side of the entrance.

Monkeys chattered and scampered in the trees overhead. It should have been peaceful, but the security was a forbidding presence. Lucien noted the samoy dogs prowling in their wire cages, the security cameras mounted on the walls.

An achingly pretty Thai girl in a white silk robe greeted him at the entrance. Lucien recognised her as his father's *mia noi*, his junior wife. As far as he knew his parents had never divorced.

She extended her hands. '*Sawadee ka*,' she murmured.

'*Sawadee krap*,' Lucien responded.

She turned and led him across the marble-tiled foyer into the house. The interior was decorated in the grand quasi-French style known as 'louis', marble, gilt and red brocade. His father was in his private gymnasium, which overlooked the pool. He lay naked, face down on a padded leather table, while a young Thai woman rubbed oil into his shoulders.

Lucien winced. He had not realised how ill his father was. He could have counted his ribs.

'Lucien,' Baptiste said, without looking around.

'Hello, papa.'

'Come and sit down. You want a drink? There's whisky in the bar, and beer in the refrigerator.'

Lucien found a Singha beer and swallowed straight from the bottle. Through the windows he could see another girl on the terrace, sitting by the pool. He could see the top of her head, and brown limbs. She was reading a magazine.

At an age when other men are thinking of retirement my father is still surrounded with a personal harem! Admiration and disgust gnawed at him. I am always comparing, he thought. But I cannot compete.

He dragged out a heavy rattan chair and sat down in front of the massage table, so that he could see his father's face. There were crevices in the old man's cheeks and forehead he had not noticed before. He could hear his breath sawing in his lungs.

The masseuse started work on Baptiste's feet. She cracked the joints in his toes, one by one. Baptiste grimaced. 'She even cracks the bones in my head,' he said, and grinned.

'She's pretty,' he said.

'You want her?'

Lucien shook his head. 'But thank you for the offer.'

Baptiste looked disappointed. The girl rubbed oil into his feet and began working them with her thumb and fingers. 'A good masseuse,' he said. 'When she works on your feet, you feel it even in your head.' He rested his chin on his forearms. 'Get me a cigarette.'

Lucien got up and brought him his silver cigarette case. Baptiste flipped one into his mouth and Lucien lit it with his father's gold Dunhill. Almost immediately Baptiste's face flushed and he looked as if he was about to choke. He could not catch his breath. The masseuse stopped, frightened.

'Don't stop, *imbécile*!' he snapped. 'It's just a little cough.' He overcame the spasm and took a deep breath.

'*Maman* says you have emphysema.'

'It is what the doctors like to call it. A fancy-sounding word they can do fuck all about. So, I cannot climb mountains no more. I have a heart like a bull.'

'You ought to give these things up.'

'*Putain*! It's no worse than breathing Bangkok every day.' He pointed to a leather attaché case in the corner of the room. 'Have a look in there.'

Lucien fetched the case, and laid it on his lap. Crocodile skin with solid gold clasps. Expensive.

'Go on, open it,' Baptiste growled.

Lucien snapped open the locks. The inside of the case was jammed with bundles of five-hundred-baht notes, wrapped in thick rubber bands. 'One and a half million baht,' Baptiste said. 'A quarter of a million francs.'

Lucien felt his mouth go dry. He had never seen so much money, in cash, in his life.

'It's for you.'

So. He felt his body sag with relief. Papa was going to come through for him after all.

'But you have to earn it.'

'Earn it?'

'I told you, you don't have to work hard to make money. If you just have to work hard, every man breaking rocks and carrying bricks will live in a villa like this.' He tapped his temple with his forefinger. 'You just have to be smart and take a risk now and then.'

Lucien looked back at the money.

His father smiled at him. His masseuse was working on his legs now, rubbing oil into the back of his thighs, kneading the muscles with her strong fingers. 'You still want to go back to France, Luc?'

'I have to.'

Baptiste drew on his cigarette, watching him through his one good eye. 'You want to know what you must do to earn that money?'

'Kill someone?'

'All that money just to kill someone? In Thailand?' More laughter, another coughing fit. 'No, Luc. You have to pick up a suitcase for me and deliver it where I tell you.'

'Drugs.'

'What else is worth this much money? T-shirts?'

Lucien snapped the case shut. No, he wouldn't do it. 'I thought the idea was never to go near the stuff yourself.'

'I want to see what you're made of, Luc. If you've got balls.'

'No, papa.'

'Why? It offends your morals? Think about it. If I stop tomorrow, will this business stop? No. I cannot stop people injecting themselves with drugs, or paying to have sex with a beautiful woman, or I don't know what. It is a bad world. Nothing you or I will do can make any difference. If someone tells you it is not true they are talking bullshit. Like you I am an *homme d'affaires*, and the first rule of business is: make a profit. So I go where there is profit. Is it so bad, Luc?'

Lucien thought about his mother. All his life she had warned him this would happen. Keep your distance, Luc. Stay away from him, Luc. For me, for my sake, Luc.

'So, what you going to do? Go back to France, try to pay off all this money you owe? Or you want to stay here and be a pirate like your papa?' He grinned, the fabulous white smile against his mahogany skin and the black eye-patch, so charming, and so irresistible.

'I need time to think,' Lucien said.

'Okay,' Baptiste said. 'But I think you have already made up your mind.'

50

Bangkok's Chinatown was a labyrinth of cramped alleys, crammed with Peugeot and Datsun cars, clamorous with the cries of hawkers and the racket of radios. Chinese characters scribbled vertically up the walls, cramped shophouses selling everything from ancient bits of machinery to Elect Nixon badges and rhinoceros horn, while outside in the street old women hawked wicker baskets filled with bananas and white cabbages and live ducks and red peppers and papayas.

Lucien manoeuvred the brown Toyota through the maze. He had the air conditioner on full but his palms were greasy on the wheel, and there was a sticky crawl of perspiration along his back and under his arms.

Small children patrolled the traffic selling flowers and food, others offered to clean windscreens for one baht. A youth on a Kawasaki weaved through the traffic, his girlfriend perched side-saddle on the back, as if she was glued there. She was filing her nails.

Two hundred and fifty thousand francs.

All right it would not solve all his problems. But he would be able to pay off his immediate creditors without crawling to Noelle. She need never know. He would take the money and go back to Paris, start to fight his way back, as he had done before.

He knew why his father had done this. It was a sweetener, the lure of a little fast money to seduce him. He thinks that money is my god, like it is to him.

It was an enormous risk. He tried not to think about what would happen if he was stopped and searched by the police after he collected the suitcase. He wondered if it was true what they said about Thailand; that you could get out of

anything you wanted if you had the money. Did Baptiste have that sort of power?

He experienced the same tightness in his chest he had felt that night with Ruby Wen, that same *frisson* of dread and excitement. His pulse was banging in his veins and his whole body sparked with adrenalin. He sensed that he could easily become addicted to this terrible high. Like some men are addicted to speed, or free-falling out of planes.

The lights changed and the traffic took off, spewing plumes of black exhaust fumes.

Lucien looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. He was running late. He was supposed to make the delivery at the Indra Regent at eleven o'clock, but in the Bangkok traffic an hour might not be long enough to travel even that short distance. He stared at a traffic policeman in the intersection, and felt a flush of guilt. *Merde*, I am never going to make a good criminal.

It was going to be the longest afternoon of his life.

He found the street he was looking for, turned into a laneway and parked outside a *bac si*. It was a tiny shop, dark and gloomy, not much more than a hole in the wall, rusted iron shutters pulled halfway open.

Lucien went inside. There was a pervading odour of things long dead. Dark wooden cupboards ranged along the walls, rows of jars lined the glass cabinets; dried seahorses, powdered bones of tigers, rare herbs, desiccated animal glands.

An old Chinese woman in black pyjamas appeared from a back room. Lucien handed her a torn one-hundred-baht note. The old lady peered at it suspiciously, and disappeared into a back room. A minute later she reappeared, handed Lucien back the torn note and beckoned him to follow her.

Strips of fly paper hung from the lintel and they stuck to his face like spiders' webs. The back room was even gloomier than the shop, a rickety wooden table, an abacus, a single bare bulb hanging from a flex. A man in blue shorts and white singlet sat hunched over a Chinese language newspaper. When he saw Lucien, he got up, pulled a large black Samsonite suitcase from a corner of the room and handed it to him.

Lucien took it without a word and walked out again, his

heart hammering in his chest. He threw the briefcase in the boot of the rented Toyota and drove off.

Rajprarop Road was a screeching, chaotic tangle of *tuk-tuks*, lorries, buses and Japanese cars, spewing exhaust into the concrete corridor. The air was green and sulphurous and heat rose from the asphalt in shimmering waves.

He double-parked the brown Toyota twenty metres from the Indra Regent. He took the key from the ignition and taped it, as prearranged, under the dashboard. Then he got out and went to the corner near the Baiyoke Tower. He took a mobile phone from his pocket and punched in a number. It was answered on the first ring. He read the Toyota's registration number, repeated it, and ended the call.

A few moments later Ruby emerged from the foyer of the hotel. She looked up and down the street, saw the brown Toyota, and checked the registration number against the number she had written on the reverse of a business card. Then she walked quickly across the street, got in, and started the engine. She made a U-turn through the traffic; a taxi braked, its tyres squealing, the driver keeping his fist on the horn. She headed back towards Ploenchit Road.

She did not notice the Kawasaki motorcycle that pulled into the traffic behind her.

Lucien paid no attention to the motorcyclist either. He found a taxi outside the Baiyoke Tower and gave the driver his father's address off Sukhumwit Road.

Two hundred and fifty thousand francs.

He had never imagined it would be so easy.

51

The high walls and the evening clamour of the cicadas muted the din of traffic from the road outside. Noelle sat on the terrace in her tennis whites, her dark hair pushed back from her forehead with a broad white sweat-band. She was sipping lime juice and soda water. She always surprised him. Unless you got close she could be mistaken for a woman twenty years younger. He put the briefcase by the French doors and walked outside.

She looked up. 'Did you have a good day?' she said.

'A little sight-seeing,' he said. Oh, and a little drug-smuggling.

'How is your father?'

For a moment he considered a lie. But she always knew. So he said: 'He looks thin.'

'But of course. I told you, he is sick. You want a drink?'

He went inside and poured himself a large whisky and soda from the bar. He took a slice of lime from the dish and dropped it into the glass. 'How was your tennis?'

'The same.'

'Did you win?'

'I do not remember. Does it matter?'

He joined her on the terrace and sat down. Two red-tailed African parrots squawked in a corner cage.

'Has your father got his claws into you?' she said.

'Why do you say that?'

She smiled. 'You look pale and shaken.'

'You talk about him as if he is a monster.'

Noelle raised an eyebrow. 'He does monstrous things.'

'He is still my father.'

Noelle studied the crocodile-skin briefcase in the doorway. 'Is that new?'

Lucien felt uneasy, as if she could see through it, see the one and a quarter million baht inside. 'Yes. I bought it . . . at a shop . . . the Indra Regent arcade.' So much money. Lucien felt a surge of excitement and energy. It was hard to sit still like this. He was no longer a victim of the economy, of his partner, of the bank. His little adventure in Bangkok would pay off his most immediate debts at least.

'Are you all right?' Noelle said.

'Sure,' he said. He stirred the ice in his drink with his finger.

'For God's sake, Luc, what's wrong? I can feel the tension coming off you in waves. Tell me!'

He took a deep breath. He would have to tell her some time. 'Papa wants me to stay and take over the bar,' he said.

Noelle's face underwent a transformation. Her lips compressed in a tight, thin line.

'I said no,' he said.

Her eyes had shadows. She looked at him as if she was seeing him for the first time. 'Did you?'

'Of course I said no. What else could I do?'

'It is nothing to do with me any more, what you do with your life.'

'Mama, I know what he does. I want no part of it.'

'It is your decision. I cannot fight this battle for you any more.'

'I don't want you to.'

Noelle finished her drink and stood up. 'I must go and have a shower. Are you staying in for dinner?'

He shook his head.

'Of course. A man does not stay home with his mother in Bangkok.'

He reached for her hand. 'Everything will be okay,' he said.

She gave him a tight smile and went inside.

For a moment he wished he had not lied. He had not said no to his father, not yet. He wondered why it was so hard to tell Noelle the truth. Sometimes the voice of his conscience and the voice of his mother became inextricably intertwined.

He stared at the briefcase. Such a temptation. He was tired

of working for money. It would be so easy to let money just come to him. Winter had lingered in Paris, and there was still ice in the streets; he imagined the northern winds slicing into him as he emerged from the Métro. For all its dirt and stink and heat, he did not want to leave Bangkok just yet. It's in my blood, he thought. I was born in Asia. I love this smell of danger and sex. This is a place a man can feel alive.

Noelle stripped off her tennis clothes and went into the bathroom. The marble was cool under her feet. She stopped to study herself briefly in the mirror. Getting old, she thought. Finally. She was still slim, but her figure was not what it was, firmness giving way to age. But no one stays young for ever.

Oh, Lucien!

He was lying to her, of course. Did he really think she could not tell? She had tried to turn him against his father, and that had been wrong. Not because Baptiste deserved his son's loyalties and affection, but because she had painted Baptiste as a devil, and she saw now that the devil can be an alluring personality for any young man. In youth, he can strike a handsome bargain.

She had manoeuvred Lucien to Paris, far away from his father's influence. But it had not been his own life, it had been the life she had chosen for him. Now she would have to let him be, to make his own mistakes.

She realised she had no idea what sort of man her son was. Everything he had done so far had been a reaction to her, or to Baptiste. They had all become tangled in each other's webs.

She climbed under the shower and gasped at the shock of the cold water. She leaned against the tiles, letting it stream over her body. Oh, Lucien. Sooner or later you have to be free to choose your own way.

But Heaven help you if the way you choose is your father's.

52

Ruby turned off Petchaburi Road and into the underground car park of a commercial high rise. She parked the Toyota in one of the bays, and got out, the heels of her leather pumps echoing on the concrete. Suddenly a car on the other side of the car park turned on its headlights and there were shouts all around her.

Her insides turned to ice.

There were men in khaki uniforms pointing handguns at her face. One of them grabbed her, pushed her over the bonnet of the Toyota, forced handcuffs on her wrists. They hurt and she cried out in pain and protest.

A man in a dark suit found the car keys and opened the boot. He pulled out the suitcase and snapped open the locks. There were ten glassene packets of white powder inside.

'Bring her,' the man said and they dragged her towards the car with the headlights.

The noise and suddenness of it all had stunned and terrified her, but even as they led her away Ruby was telling herself to be calm. She could not imagine what had gone wrong, but she knew that either Crocé or Eddie would get her out of this. She just had to keep her wits about her; be calm, and above all, be silent.

53

The Narcotics Suppression Centre was a sprawl of dilapidated wooden barracks in the heart of Chinatown. Ruby was led through the labyrinth of smoky corridors, past dingy cubicles where policemen sat hunched over ancient Remington typewriters or sprawled around playing cards. She was led into a drab office and pushed into a wooden chair. It was cramped and stinking hot inside the room, and Ruby fought the urge to hyperventilate. Stay calm, heya!

She looked around the office. There was a grey metal desk, cluttered with papers and cardboard files, and a greasy black museum-piece telephone. Metal filing cabinets were pushed against the walls. The overhead fan appeared to be broken.

The Thai policeman in the dark suit followed her inside and slammed the briefcase on the table. Several of the cardboard files slid to the floor. He ignored them. He snapped open the locks, threw open the lid and lined the packets of heroin on the desk in front of her.

'My name is Colonel Poonsiri Ramawong,' he said, in English. He leaned both hands on the table and brought his face close to hers. 'Unless you co-operate I am going to ask the court for the death penalty.'

Several other plain-clothed police squeezed into the room behind her. As if it wasn't uncomfortable enough in here, Ruby thought.

Ruby squirmed in the chair. 'Take off handcuffs, okay,' Ruby said. 'Cannot feel my fingers.'

Colonel Ramawong grinned. 'Confess to me you are trying to smuggle these drugs to the United States and things will be better for you.'

If she was not so frightened Ruby could have laughed in his face. How could she make such an absurd declaration and

then have cause for optimism? She had heard policemen say some really stupid things, but this would have to be a world record.

'Don't know anything about this.'

'It was in your briefcase, in your car. Seven kilos of heroin! It will be better for you if you admit your guilt right now.'

Ruby stared back at him. She must not panic. Money could buy anything in Thailand. It was just a matter of negotiation. 'Just drive this car for a friend. Just a rental car, can see the sticker on the rear window, unless you are really blind. This friend asks me to pick up this car for him. Don't know anything about this briefcase. Perhaps it is already there, or perhaps some policeman put it there, heya.'

Colonel Ramawong was not pleased with this reply. He leaned even closer. She could smell the spices on his breath from his lunch. 'Right now I can invoke Article Twenty-seven. You know what that is, Miss Wen? It means we don't need you to confess, because there will not be a trial. We will just take you out and shoot you. It would be a shame. Such a pretty woman.'

So hot in the room, so many people crammed in. Her blouse was sticking to her back with sweat. She fought down another wave of panic. Had been in tough positions before, had always found a way out. She would again. 'Want to talk to Mister Baptiste Crocé,' she whispered.

'Don't know anyone of that name,' the major said. But his expression changed. He jerked his head towards the door and one by one the other policemen filed out of the room. Ruby heard the door click shut behind them. They were alone.

Ruby knew she had regained the upper hand. 'How much you want?' Ruby whispered.

The colonel shook his head. 'Cannot help you, Miss Wen. Americans watching us very closely on this case. You must admit you are guilty.'

'Want to speak to Baptiste Crocé.'

Again the flicker of fear in the colonel's eyes. 'We are going to ask for no trial. Execution under Article Twenty-seven, as soon as possible.'

Ruby thought she was going to vomit. Execution?

The thought occurred to her; what if the Colonel was telling the truth, was being pressured by the Americans and also trying to protect Crocé? Perhaps it would be an easy answer for everyone.

This time her panic overtook her. 'Want to speak to Keelan. DEA agent in Hong Kong!'

She saw the shadow of uncertainty on the Colonel's face. There might yet be a joker in the deck. 'What did you say?'

'Keelan, Lieutenant John Keelan. Agent for DEA in Hong Kong. Is good friend, okay? I work for him!' Even as she said the words she wondered what sort of gamble she was taking now.

Colonel Ramawong walked to the door and threw it open. He called two policemen into the room. 'Take her away,' he said.

Maha Chai

Through the grimy windows of the police van Ruby saw the forbidding iron gates, silhouetted against the scorched and violet sky of evening. The driver sounded his horn and the gates swung open. They drove through.

The first courtyard was more like a huge covered market than a prison, a jumble of footstalls and traders. Ahead was another huge pair of wooden gates and high above uniformed guards on the towers, cradling ancient carbines.

Her companions on the journey were all Thais, mostly heroin addicts, eyes red, noses running, the smell of stale and sour sweat overwhelming. They stared at her expensive clothes with a mixture of awe and hatred.

This cannot be happening to me, Ruby thought. Someone will come and save me from this. Eddie. Lucien. Keelan. Someone will get me out of here.

This is only supposed to happen to small-time dealers and addicts, like these miserable creatures around her.

Not to Ruby Wen.

Inside the prison she was photographed, and her fingerprints taken. Then she was taken into a small, windowless room.

The only furniture was a grey metal desk. The door clanged shut behind her.

There were three women guards. One of them had three stripes on her shirt-sleeve, the sergeant; she was a round-faced Thai, as squat and powerful as a wrestler. She regarded Ruby's nappa leather skirt and cerise Nina Ricci blouse with ill-disguised contempt.

'Strip,' she said.

Ruby swore at her in Cantonese, Thai, and for good measure, English, and spat on the concrete floor.

She did not see the blow coming. Suddenly she was on the floor, and all the breath had gone out of her. She brought her knees up to her chest and tried to drag some air into her lungs.

'Strip,' the sergeant repeated.

The other two guards hauled her to her feet. Ruby could not straighten. If there had been anything in her stomach she would have had the pleasure of depositing it all over the sergeant who had struck her. She staggered, light-headed.

'We could strip you ourselves,' one of the guards said, 'but it would be a shame to tear your fancy clothes.'

Ruby took off her blouse and skirt. The women made admiring noises when they saw her white lace underwear. The sergeant looped her fingers under the gold chain at her throat and tugged. It broke easily.

She opened her fist to examine the diamond pendant and smiled. 'I'll look after this.' She held out her hand. 'Now your watch.'

Ruby hesitated. Her watch was from Chopard of Geneva, diamond-studded, with heart-shaped rubies in the shape of a bow below the face.

'Want me to take it off?' the sergeant said.

Ruby felt suddenly calm, the ice of her anger overcoming the humiliation and fear. Fat little peasant bitch! I will chop you down, heya! You know who you're messing with, you piece of dog's business? When Eddie Lau hears what you have done, he will have you washed!

Ruby carefully removed her wristwatch. She tossed it at

the sergeant who grinned and put it in her pocket. She took two latex rubber gloves from a drawer in the desk and put them on.

'Bend over the desk.'

'No.'

A baton slammed into her kidneys. She screamed and dropped to her knees. The guards picked her up and pushed her against the desk. 'Come on, pretty thing, bend over for your old mother,' one of them whispered.

No point to resist, Ruby thought. No help for this now. But I will remember it all, every little humiliation and I will repay it with interest.

She bent over the desk.

She felt the woman's fingers roughly explore her vagina and anus. 'By the look of you I think maybe it is velvet lined,' the sergeant cackled and the two guards laughed with her. 'Okay, put your clothes back on.'

She was taken to a stone building with a narrow verandah, and pushed into a cell not much bigger than the bathroom of her apartment in Hong Kong. She was immediately assailed by the stench of sweat and the putrid scent of the open squat toilet, the *hongnam*, in the corner. There were more than a dozen women inside, three Europeans, the rest Thais. Faces stared at her, some curious, some hostile. Another body to take up space, to breathe the parched and fetid air.

Ruby looked at the floor. Filthy, grey concrete, smeared with unspeakable stains. Ruby squatted down against the wall, hoping to avoid soiling her skirt too badly. Crocé must know what was happening by now. The news would be all over Bangkok. He must already be on his way to get her out. She could not imagine spending all night in this place. Before morning the bribe would be paid and she would be back in her own apartment, washing off the stench of the prison in a perfumed bath.

The humiliation of the strip search had not yet been absorbed, the memory was too fresh, too sharp. And the niggling dark shadow of real fear remained, had harried her ever since she was pushed into the prison van.

Article Twenty-seven. Execution without trial.

No, it was impossible! She closed her eyes and the first thing she thought of was her car, the Mercedes 380 SEC coupe that Eddie had paid for soon after she arrived in Bangkok. She could smell the leather of the Recaro seats, feel the frigid luxury of the air conditioner, hear U2 on the Blaupunkt stereo system.

That was her world. She had left this world of deprivation and powerlessness far behind when she came down the mountain from Shatin. This was just a bad dream.

'What are you in for?' a voice said, in English. It was a European, a blonde girl with an American accent. She might have been pretty but the fluorescent lights gave her skin a deathly pallor.

'Threw hand grenade at the king,' Ruby said. She did not have to talk to these people, she thought. These pitiful wrecks. Drug addicts and hippies and thieves. Soon Crocé would come and she could forget any of this had happened.

'Two grams of junk,' the girl said, as if she had not heard. 'Two fucking grams. The taxi driver who sold it to me must have ratted to the cops. Motherfucker.'

Ruby's thighs had started to ache. The temptation to slide all the way to the floor was great.

'You'll be all right,' the American girl said, 'you look like you've got cash. You got money, you can buy anything you want in here.'

Ruby did not want to talk. The fluorescent light emitted a low and persistent buzzing noise. Already she had a mosquito bite on her neck. One of the girls got up, and squatted on the *hong nam* in front of all of them. A pungent odour filled the cell.

Ruby shook her head in disbelief.

'You'll get used to it, sister,' the blonde girl said. 'Don't tell us your shit don't stink.'

Ruby slid all the way to the floor and let her forehead slide onto her arm.

She hoped Crocé would come for her soon.

54

That first night there was no sleep, just a blurring of the lines between reality and dreams. The fluorescent light was never switched off, and the maddening buzzing joined with the incessant whining of the mosquitoes and the sounds of coughing and spitting from the adjoining cells, to add to her torment.

Only the Thais could devise such an exquisite torture as this, Ruby decided.

Once she woke from a half-dream to find cockroaches swarming over her. She reacted with disgust, screaming and leaping to her feet to brush the insects off her body, waking her cell mates who swore at her and shouted to her to keep quiet.

Several times she glanced at her wrist to check the time and then remembered how the guard had stolen it. Probably worth five years salary to that peasant bitch, Ruby thought, with cold contempt. She felt a growing pressure in her own bladder which she tried to resist but finally she was forced to squat over the *hong nam* in front of the rest of the women and relieve herself. The smell of the open toilet was even worse up close and her crocodile-skin shoes got soiled.

Eddie will have to buy me a new pair, she told herself as consolation.

She tried to sleep after that, but it was impossible. She prayed that soon it would be morning. Even at this time of the night the heat was only a few degrees below that of the day. Already she was stinking like the rest of them.

Heya, it would be over soon. Tonight she would be at home in her own bed.

* * *

By six o'clock the cells were already ovens, but they had to endure another hour of the breathless heat before the guards threw open the cell doors. Ruby staggered onto the verandah, sagging against the railing. She gulped in the musty air of the prison like a thirsty man gulping cold water.

'Your first time, honey?'

It was the blonde girl. For some reason she seemed to have taken Ruby as her charge. Ruby studied her more closely. She was wearing a cotton Indian shift, a sarong and thongs. A hippy, a backpacker. Bird-shit tourists, the Thais called them.

Ruby noticed the woman had not shaved her legs or under her arms, although her blonde hair had been chopped short, with what could have been a blunt pair of scissors. She exuded a gamey smell.

'Name's Nancy, friends call me Nan. What about you?'

Why am I standing here having this conversation in this place? Ruby thought. Where was Crocé? 'Ruby.'

'You Chinese, Malay, what?'

For some reason Ruby thought of her peasant father and his ridiculous pride and she heard herself say: 'Hakka.' Nancy looked mystified, so Ruby added: 'Hong Kong Chinese.'

'You're a dealer, right?'

Ruby shook her head.

'Sure you are, I can tell by your clothes. Got to be a big-time dealer.' When Ruby did not answer her, she said: 'Ever been in prison before, Rube?'

Ruby shook her head.

'Well, you sure picked a good place to learn. You cut it in Maha Chai, you can cut it anywhere.'

'How long you been here?' Ruby asked her.

'Got busted March 23rd 1991. How long's that?'

'Been in here three years?' Ruby said.

'And still waiting for a fucking trial. I tell you honey, you want justice in Thailand, you gotta fucking pay for it.'

'Be out today,' Ruby said. 'Have friends who will help me.'

'Well, we all need friends.' Nancy leaned back on the rail and looked her over. 'You sure got those fancy clothes fucked up already. Get the tip, Rube. Designer label don't do shit in here.'

'Will remember next time.'

Nancy lowered her voice. 'You carrying, Rube? You got any shit to sell?'

'Did have seven units, heya,' Ruby said, and she watched the other girl blanch. 'But get the tip, Nan. I lost it.'

'Too bad,' Nancy said.

'No shit,' Ruby said.

Breakfast was a bowl of rice with a slop of vegetables and a few bits of meat. The meat smelled as if it were going off and Ruby refused to eat it. Nancy pulled it towards her. 'You'll find your appetite after a couple of days, honey,' she said.

'Couple of days I won't be here.'

One of the other Europeans looked over. Dutch or German, Ruby decided, by her accent. 'What are you?' the woman said. 'The king's sister? Don't waste your time on the bitch, Nan.'

'She's okay,' Nancy grinned. 'Just had a sheltered life. Haven't you, fancy pants?'

They left her sitting alone in the food hall. Ruby let her head drop to the hard wooden table. She felt ridiculous sitting here in her expensive clothes, now soiled with the dirt of the prison, sweat stains all over her blouse. Her eyes felt gritty from lack of sleep, and there was a cold hunger gnawing at her, and the metallic taste of fear in her mouth.

What if Baptiste Crocé did not come?

What if Colonel Ramawong had not been bluffing?

No, by now Eddie-ah would know what had happened. He would move heaven and earth to have her freed. It would just take a few days longer.

'Ruby Wen,' the guard said.

She jumped to her feet, her heart hammering. Was this freedom or the Browning machine gun?

'You have a visitor.'

Ruby wanted to shout with relief. So, they had come at last. Heya, I'm getting out of this shit-hole. The three European

girls were huddled on the other side of the verandah, watching her, their eyes hooded.

'See ya, fancy pants,' Nan said.

But it wasn't Crocé, and it wasn't Eddie Lau.

She had never seen the man before. He was an Indian, in a white linen three-piece suit, a large diamond ring winking on the little finger of his right hand, a chunky Rolex on his wrist. A red silk handkerchief protruded from his breast pocket.

His black hair was receding, but hung over the collar at the back in thin black curls. He was running to fat, his jowls wobbling under his chin, the morning heat making him perspire freely. He mopped at his face and neck with a white handkerchief.

Another younger man stood beside him, holding his attaché case.

'Miss Ruby Wen?' the fat man said.

The visitors' room was an oblong-shaped room divided by two sets of iron bars, set six feet apart. All conversation had to be conducted across this no man's land, with the guards standing by, watching and listening.

'Who are you?' Ruby shouted back.

'My name is Julian Prassaran. I have been retained by a Mister Eddie Lau as your legal counsel.'

'Where is Eddie-ah?'

Prassaran ignored the question. 'He wants you to know you are not to worry. He is going to take care of everything. First we must clear up all this foolishness about this jolly Article Twenty-seven.'

'When you getting me out of here?'

Prassaran mopped at his neck. 'Please, Miss Wen, I must implore you to be patient. The wheels of justice sometimes turn with excruciating slowness in Thailand. But I can assure you that all will be well. After we have persuaded the authorities to remove the threat of Article Twenty-seven, we will see about organising bail.'

Ruby had thought she was going to be released. Now the realisation of what this stupid Indian was suggesting began to sink in. 'Have to stay here, heya? In this stinking jail?'

'We will have you released very soon. Now what sort of things do you need? You have a pillow?'

'Pillow?' Ruby repeated, stunned.

'I will send one along later with food and some money. Is there anything else I can do to make your stay more comfortable?'

He sounds like the concierge at the Hong Kong Peninsula, Ruby thought. 'Need my Azzedine Alaïa to change into for dinner. Some bath salts, okay. And my mobile phone.'

'I don't think it's allowed,' Prassaran said, without a trace of irony.

'Tell Eddie that Ruby will cut off his stalk if he don't get me out of here!' She slammed her palm against the bars. 'No shit!'

The young assistant smirked.

Prassaran ostentatiously checked his watch. 'I understand this is all very upsetting. My goodness, look at the time.'

Calm down, Ruby. Two to one you're out of here in a few days. Eddie won't let you down.

'Anything else you need,' Prassaran said, 'just give me a call.'

He nodded to his assistant and turned away.

'How?' Ruby shouted after him. 'How can I give you a call, okay?'

But Prassaran was gone. One of the guards led her back to the prison yard.

55

Shenzhen City, Special Economic Zone, China

The entertainment in Shenzhen did not compare to Hong Kong; there was no racetrack, no topless bars, not the same frenetic bustle. But there was no dearth of discos for the amusement of the Hong Kong tourists and the spoiled brats of the cadres. Eddie's favourite haunt was in the Century Plaza Hotel, on the very top floor. He never danced, but he often sat in a corner booth, with a bottle of Hennessey VSOP, chain smoking, until two or three in the morning.

Ever since we were forced to flee Hong Kong he has been drinking and smoking too much, Vincent thought. And now the news of Ruby Wen's arrest had plunged him into an even darker mood.

'Let me come with you tomorrow,' Vincent said.

'Too dangerous for you.'

'He betrayed me also.'

'You are not expendable, not just some four-nine boy! I will take revenge for both of us.'

'I can drive for you.'

Eddie shook his head, his eyes hooded, his thoughts somewhere in the void. Vincent knew Eddie was no longer thinking about Timothy Man and his imminent execution, a subject that had preoccupied him for weeks. He was thinking about Ruby Wen.

Maria Carey was singing 'Without You'. Couldn't go anywhere without hearing that song. All the pirate CD stalls were playing it, all the discos. Are they playing it for me or for Ruby Wen? Eddie wondered.

'You are thinking about her.'

'Right now she is lying in some stinking jail surrounded by rats.'

Personally I feel sorry for the rats, Vincent thought.

'This lawyer, Prassaran,' Eddie said. 'He is good?'

'He is very expensive,' Vincent answered.

'I don't care about the money. Just get her out of there. Do we know how much the Thais want?'

'Prassaran has offered the prosecutor a million baht. He won't budge.'

'Offer him five, ten million. Whatever he asks for. Just get her out.'

Ten million baht for Ruby Wen? She was a cheat and a whore and she had made a fool of them countless times and he still forgave her everything. Vincent thought of her sitting in her own filth in some mosquito-infested prison and drew some comfort from it. He only hoped the stupid little bitch was truly suffering.

'I will tell him.'

'I want her out of there,' Eddie repeated. He drained his glass and refilled it, another three fingers of cognac.

'We will get her out,' Vincent said. And he would make sure they got her out, if that was what Eddie wanted. He would have liked to have cut out her black whore's heart with a spoon, but if Eddie wanted her free he would do anything, offer anything to make sure it happened.

'You think I should go to Bangkok?' Eddie asked him.

'Too dangerous. Louis Huu will wash you the moment you step outside the airport. We cannot protect you there.'

Eddie nodded. He knew Vincent was right. He comforted himself with more pleasant thoughts. 'I wonder what Sir Timothy Man is doing tonight,' he said. 'I hope he is enjoying himself. It is the last time.'

DEA EYES ONLY
CONFIDENTIAL
FOR KEELAN, DEA LIAISON, HOPEWELL CENTRE, HONG KONG
PASS TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES
FROM LEE, BANGKOK

ON 290594 FOLLOWING JOINT OPERATION WITH THAILAND NARCOTICS SUPPRESSION UNIT THE FOLLOWING PERSON WAS ARRESTED IN POSSESSION OF SEVEN KILOS OF HEROIN IN PETCHABURI ROAD.
WEN SHUI MING, ALIAS RUBY WEN, DOB 26.3.69, RESIDES 17B/63 CONDUIT ROAD, PUN SHAN KUI, HONG KONG. P/P 156341.
THIS PERSON HAS ASKED LOCAL POLICE TO CONTACT YOU URGENTLY TO CLARIFY HER POSITION AS A CI. CAN YOU PLEASE ADVISE.

Maha Chai

The visiting area was bedlam, as always. Friends and families of the Thai prisoners crowded into the visiting room, shouting to each other through the bars. In an adjoining cell, food baskets were being searched by the prison guards before being passed through a hatch to the prisoners waiting outside in the corridor.

Ruby searched the crowd of faces, expecting to see Prassaran. A European pushed his way through the milling crowd.

Lucien.

Ruby pressed her face against the bars, weary and sick and frightened. Lucien . . . the last person she had expected. He looked so clean in his white cotton shirt, a symbol of the privileged outside world to which she yearned to return.

'You okay?' he shouted to her.

'What you doing here?' she called back to him.

'I have to come.'

'Where is your father?'

'He does not know I am here.'

You are so stupid, Ruby thought. If you were in prison, I would not come, would never think about you ever again. Must be crazy. But then, can never tell with men. The really weak ones follow you everywhere like puppies.

'Get your father, okay. Tell him Ruby Wen need his help. Have to get me out of this place.'

'I will. I promise! I promise you I will get you out.' He held a parcel wrapped in brown paper above his head. 'I bring you some food.'

Ruby sagged against the bars.

'Are you okay?'

'Got a fever,' she said. It was either the food or the water. But if she did not drink and eat she would die. When she did drink and eat she got sick. Better to be sick than to be dead. For now.

'I will help you,' he shouted again. His face was creased with worry. Never understand him, she thought. I cheat him and steal his money and he likes me even better. He is like a dog licking your face when you are dying. A little comfort but not much use.

There were really only two people who could help her. One was his father. The other was Eddie.

She turned away and waited outside in the corridor for her parcel. The guards had already ripped it open. Inside there was a chicken, fruit, and more importantly, some medicine. She caught a glimpse of Lucien's face before she turned away to return to the prison yard. He looked genuinely distressed.

Must be soft in the head.

No shit.

56

Hong Kong

Jardine House is one of Hong Kong's most famous landmarks. The building's circular windows have earned it many nicknames; such as the Hong Kong Stilton, or, to the Chinese, the House of a Thousand Arseholes. Next door is Exchange Square, a monolith of granite and glass that houses the Hong Kong stock market, the Hang Seng. It was in this building that Sir Timothy Man maintained his office and where he spent his last afternoon on this earth.

His chauffeur-driven Rolls–Royce Phantom conveyed him to the Luk Yu teahouse in Stanley Street at a quarter to six that evening. The driver did not notice, or pay any attention to, the Yamaha motorcycle that pulled into the traffic behind him on Pedder.

As Sir Timothy Man climbed out of the back of the Rolls, the motorcycle swung into the kerbside behind and the pillion rider jumped off. He calmly produced an automatic pistol from his leather jacket and fired five shots into the head and body of Sir Timothy Man. Then he jumped back onto the Kawasaki, which roared away down Stanley and then turned up Pottinger towards the Mid-levels.

A Chinese sergeant from Central, Michael Chui, was one of the first detectives on the scene. A patrol sergeant had already detained an old English couple, who claimed to have seen everything, and as soon as Chui arrived he pointed them out. Colonel James Kirkham–Pratt, and his wife Marjorie, were a relic from another age; like the rickshaw drivers at the Central ferry terminal and the clock tower at Kowloon, Chui thought. The old boy wore a

navy-blue pin-striped woollen suit and a bowler hat, his white moustaches teased to two symmetrical points, and he walked with the aid of a silver-topped cane. What may have perhaps been an affectation was now a necessity, Chui thought, for the old codger must be well into his eighties.

His wife Marjorie was a slightly less arresting figure though her blue broad-brimmed straw hat was in itself a distraction.

'Saw it all,' the Colonel said, as Chui approached, 'happened right there in front of us. Isn't that right, Marjorie?'

'Right in front of us.'

'Bloody little bastard,' the Colonel said, with such perfect diction that the curses sounded like an affectation.

Sir Timothy Man lay on the pavement, face down, ugly dark pools spreading around his body. His toes were pointed inwards, in an absurd position, and from beyond the police cordon people came to gawk at the corpse on their way home from work. Death has no dignity, Chui thought.

'What exactly did you see?' he asked.

'This chap got orf this motorcycle . . .'

'What sort of motorcycle? Can you describe it?'

The Colonel looked nonplussed, 'Japanese thingy. What are they called Marjorie?'

Marjorie looked blank.

'You know what I mean,' he said.

'What colour?'

The Colonel had to think about this.

'Orange,' Marjorie said.

'Yes, that's it. Orange. Orange Japanese thingy.'

'He was the rider?' Chui asked him.

'No, there was some other chap driving. Anyway, he got orf, took out a gun and started blasting away. Bloody little bastard.'

'What happens after he fires the weapon?'

'Just got back on the Japanese thingy and they both took orf.'

'They drive west?'

'Can never remember which way's west. Up that way, anyway.' He pointed towards Pottinger Street.

Dusk was falling over the street. The TV camera crews

were using lights and flashbulbs popped as newspaper crews took hurried photographs of the dead man which would appear as a blurred and grainy image in tomorrow's press.

'Can you give me a description please?'

'Just like that. Bloody little bastard. What was that?'

'Can you give me a description of the man with the gun?'

The Colonel looked at his wife. "Fraid not, old chap. He was still wearing a thingy. A helmet.'

'What about the other man? The rider?'

'He was wearing a thingy too.'

Chui swore under his breath. 'Maybe,' he said, almost as an afterthought, 'you were able to get licence plate of the motorcycle these men were driving?'

The Colonel looked him up and down. 'Of course I did. What do you think I am, young man? A complete fool?'

Just an hour later a motorcycle patrol officer from Wanchai found the Yamaha abandoned in an alley off Amoy Street. Tyler alerted the detectives at Central and he and Lacey and Brian Kwok drove there immediately.

It was a big machine for Hong Kong, 500 cc, it had been reported stolen just that morning in Mongkok. A quick search recovered a Chinese-made type 54 Makarov inside a brown Giordano carrier bag that had been stuffed under the seat. Also, in plain view, was a piece of paper that had been tacked to the petrol tank with brown tape, Chinese characters written in red ink.

'What does it say?' Tyler asked.

Brian Kwok squatted down and studied it carefully.

For the oath my finger I prick,
This is a secret you and I must keep.
If doing otherwise,
Your suffering is much and deep.

'A triad poem,' Lacey said.

'Crazy Eddie Lau,' Tyler murmured.

'Do you think he came back for this?'

Tyler shrugged. 'Who knows? Kai Tak's on full alert but I

don't think whoever did this is going to risk that route. More likely they had another motorbike or car waiting here and they drove straight out of the city to the territories. Fast speedboat over the border to the SEZ. The pistol will be ex-PLA. But let's get to work anyway. We'll start a canvass round here, see if anyone wants to remember seeing anything.'

'We're in for the long haul,' Lacey said.

'Sir Timothy won't be a great loss to humanity,' Tyler said. 'I hope to God I'm wrong about Eddie Lau. That bastard just doesn't know when to stop.'

'Bad pennies.'

'Bad news,' Tyler said.

Bangkok

Baptiste sat in a lacquered chair on the back lawn of his villa, the inevitable cigarette poised between the nicotine-stained fingers of his left hand. Parrots chattered in the banana palms above their heads, a Brahms piano concerto wafted onto the terrace from the stereo. The boyesse brought two glasses of Mekhong whisky mixed with soda and lime.

'What you ask is quite impossible,' Baptiste said.

'We have to help her,' Lucien said.

'Why? Because you sleep with her a few times?'

Lucien looked away.

'If you think you love Ruby Wen, then I am sorry for you.'

'So we just do nothing?'

Baptiste looked at his son in bewilderment. 'Of course.'

'While she rots away in prison.'

'Why should this upset me? It is not like it is me rotting in prison. Or you. Then I will be upset.'

'You tell me you have influence in this city.'

'Yes, and it costs me plenty, Luc. Believe me, it costs me plenty. That is why I do not spend this influence on just any damn thing.'

'The Thais are talking about Article Twenty-seven. Execution!'

'So you will find some other woman to sleep with. In Bangkok this is not too difficult.'

'Now I understand why *maman* calls you a monster.' Lucien murmured.

Baptiste shook his head. Did he have to explain everything to this boy? 'Let me tell you about this Ruby Wen. She dies, she does not die, has nothing to do with the government. The Chinese gangs look after their own, Luc. They know how this game is played. You think this is a Thai city? It is a Chinese city. They run everything here. They have a saying: "We don't mind who holds the cow's head as long as we can milk it." It is the way they do business all over Asia.'

'So her syndicate will get her out of there?'

'Perhaps.'

'But if they have this much power?'

'To get Ruby Wen out of Maha Chai will cost someone a lot of money. A bribe to the right official. Perhaps she is worth this. I don't know. Is not my decision. How important she is, only her people know. But you know, she has enemies here also. Very powerful enemies. I have heard that there is a Chinese called Louis Huu who has bribed the prosecutor to make sure she stays in prison. He is out-bidding the other side. Don't ask me why, is not my business. But you do not argue with this sort of man.'

'What if she talks about us to the police?'

'She won't do that.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Because the Thais can never put me in prison, Luc. I know too much about this business. If she is not sensible, they will invoke Article Twenty-seven and shoot her.'

'We cannot let that happen.'

Baptiste was amused. His reaction turned into a spasm of coughing that turned his face beet red and left him exhausted. His chest wheezed as he drew precious air into his lungs. 'Ruby Wen is a liar and a cheat and completely without moral fibre. Believe me, coming from your father this is heady praise.'

'And you cannot help her?'

'Not cannot, will not. This woman is nothing to me. And if you persist with this stupidity then perhaps it is better that you go back to France, *hein*. Perhaps Noelle is right about you, after all.'

He could see Lucien was stung by this appraisal of his personality. His eyes blazed with anger.

Baptiste said, more gently: 'You have decided what you are going to do?'

Lucien avoided his eyes. 'I do not know what I want from my life any more.'

'Thirty-two years old and still you are mooning about the meaning of life. Like a teenager, like a hippie, or I don't know what!' He reached into his pocket and pulled out some crumpled banknotes. 'You want to know about the meaning of this life?' He threw the money on the table between them. 'That is the meaning of life. There. That is power, women, property, self-respect. You are looking at it. No one cares how you make your money. As long as you have it, you are a king.'

Baptiste watched his son's reaction. It was a lie, of course, what he had told him. Money could not get you quite everything. It had never bought him Noelle. Even Baptiste Crocé could not have everything.

He could see his son pondering his return to France, to a cramped apartment, to creditors, to friends who would know he was a fool.

'I cannot go back to France,' Lucien murmured.

'Good. Then perhaps we can stop playing stupid games, and you can show me that you can learn what I have to teach you. And this is your first lesson; you do not let your pants rule your brain.'

A lesson, Baptiste thought, I myself have yet to learn.

But Lucien had the grace not to remark on this. 'All right, papa.'

'So now we can forget Ruby Wen, okay?'

Lucien did not reply for a long time. But finally he murmured: 'Ruby who?'

57

Inside the prison there was absolutely nothing to relieve the tedium. Some of the inmates sought refuge in drugs, which were plentiful, a few hundred baht for a third of a gram of crude heroin which the Thai women smoked through paper tubes – called 'chasing the dragon'. Ruby soon learned that Nancy and the two other Europeans – they were both Swiss, Ruby later discovered – were what the Thais called 'number four ladies'. They shared a needle between them, washing it between uses in the water trough in the compound outside.

Prassaran's assistant brought her food and medicines every few days. They were not allowed can openers inside Maha Chai – they could too easily be turned into weapons – and so tinned food was out of the question. Ruby learned to survive on rice and chicken which she cooked on a gas ring that was owned by Soong, a Thai *chiu chao*, who demanded a portion of the food as payment.

They used the same water for bathing or drinking. She suffered almost continuous stomach cramps.

One afternoon they got so bad that not even Prassaran's medicines could allay the pain. She spent the next few days doubled over on the floor of the cell, her knees drawn up to her chest, shivering in the baking heat. She squatted over the *hong nam* in full view of the others and no longer cared. Her bowels had turned to fire and water. She wanted to die.

'You'll be okay, honey,' she heard a voice say. 'It's just this goddamn water. Everyone gets the shits at first. You'll get through, hon.'

She recognised Nancy's voice, felt a wet cloth on her head. She tried to speak but she did not have the energy. She wanted to thank her. She realised that right now Nancy was the only friend she had in the whole world.

The Onion's apartment was in Caine Road near the Mid-levels escalators, and had been sold shortly before his death. Each of the apartments in the block had their own concrete garden box in which residents were able to grow ferns and orchids, if they chose, and it was this facility that had caused the latest excitement at the police station in Central. The new occupiers had noticed an unpleasant smell, and an unidentifiable fluid leaking from a crack in their window box. They had informed the caretaker, who in turn had notified the management. A plumber had been called in, and his grisly discovery had led to a phone call to Central police station.

The interest of the Wanchai Serious Crimes Squad in the man once known as The Onion had been noted, and Lacey had been invited to witness the exhumation.

'Will be difficult to estimate time of death exactly,' Detective Sergeant Michael Chui was saying, as they watched the decomposed remains being transferred to a zippered plastic bag, 'but safe to assume death takes place before previous owner sells the apartment. Whoever did this covered the body with quick drying cement and put more earth on top.'

'Ingenious. Any chance of making an ID?'

'Coroner informs us that teeth and fingers been removed prior to burial.'

'Maybe they're in a vase somewhere. Have you checked the pot plants?'

This appealed to Michael Chui's sense of humour.

'Have you ruled out the current owners?'

'Is a paediatric surgeon. Naturally my chief inspector keeps an open mind, but we think is very unlikely.'

'You think the body was planted on him.'

Michael Chui giggled again. He liked this woman.

'Has the body got any distinguishing characteristics at all?'

'Has only one arm. Maybe they chop off with the fingers?'

'Only one arm?' Lacey shook her head. 'It's good you called us, Michael. I think we may be able to help you with this.'

* * *

'Keelan?'

'Lace?' He sounded surprised. 'Detective Lacey,' he added, more formally.

She let him sweat on the end of the line.

'What can I do for you?'

'I'm liaising. That's procedure, isn't it?'

'What did you want to liaise with me about?'

'Li Kam-chuen. Do you want the triple-C code?'

'The one-armed fisherman.'

'Are you still interested in him?'

'I think McReadie is.'

'I'll be sending him a fax. I thought I'd let you know as well. By way of maintaining good US–Hong Kong relations.'

'And I thank you. Where is he?'

'At the morgue. Identity's not been confirmed as yet, but it's 95 per cent certain. He was located in a planter box.'

A long silence. 'A planter box.'

'Very good fertiliser, apparently.'

'Pushing up the daisies.'

'No, they were orchids.'

'Well, let us know when that's confirmed. With him dead and Eddie Lau out of town that just about shuts down that line of investigation.'

'Another day, another deceased. I'll be seeing you.'

'Lace . . .' A long silence on the end of the line. 'It doesn't matter.'

She rang off.

They met in Nickleby's, a piano bar under the Wharney Hotel. McReadie was sitting at the bar, ogling the two Filipina singers on the centre stage. He saw Keelan and waved him over. 'Beer?'

'Carlsberg,' Keelan said. The band was playing 'Total Eclipse of the Heart.' 'Good voices,' he said.

'Really? I never noticed.'

'Lacey tell you about Li Kam-chuen?'

'I heard. A high place overlooking water. At least they made sure his grave had good *feng-shui*.'

'This guy Onion?'

'Coroner thinks he really made Li's eyes water before he

died. But enough gossip. Not our problem. You said on the phone you had some news for me.'

'About Ruby Wen.'

McReadie raised an eyebrow. 'How is she these days?'

'Not that good. She was arrested in Bangkok a week ago with seven units of heroin.'

McReadie clucked his tongue. 'How did you hear about this?'

'She told the arresting officer she was a DEA informant.'

'Ruby only ever had a nodding aquaintance with the truth.' McReadie drank half of his beer. 'So, what are you going to do?'

'DEA want me to go to Bangkok and talk to her. I think we have a better bargaining position this time up.'

'Be careful, John. By the time Ruby's finished with you she'll end up United States ambassador to Thailand.'

'I don't think so.'

'Don't be too confident. I've known the lass a lot longer than you have.'

'This time she'll play ball. She's got no choice.'

McReadie took out his wallet and slapped a one-hundred-dollar note on the table. 'My big red one says she finds some way to screw you.'

'Hate to take your money. I'm a guest in the country.'

'Is it a bet?'

Keelan shook his hand. 'Easiest money I've ever made.'

McReadie just smiled and finished his beer. 'Your buy.'

58

Maha Chai prison, Bangkok

After breakfast one morning Sumalee, the head guard, stamped onto the verandah. Ruby looked up. 'You got a visitor,' she said. Prassaran again, Ruby thought. But then she saw the two armed soldiers waiting behind Sumalee. She felt a stab of fear.

Nancy was watching. She winked at her. 'Watch your step, fancy pants.'

They marched her through the men's prison to the governor's office. What now? Ruby thought. The same thought kept drumming through her brain: Article Twenty-seven.

Her Eddie-ah was going to let her die.

The governor's office was empty. The two soldiers shoved her through the door of an ante-room.

A man stood up behind the desk.

John Keelan.

This is the wrong girl, Keelan thought. They have brought me all this way from Hong Kong and they have got the wrong girl. 'Ruby?' he said.

'More better you don't get too close,' she said. 'Got lice, heya.'

Christ, it was her. What had they done to her? She was painfully thin, the bones on her wrists and shoulders visible against her skin. Her trademark designer clothes were gone, replaced by a soiled pair of cotton shorts and a T-shirt. On her feet was a cheap pair of thongs. No jewellery, no cosmetics, no cherry-red polish to her toenails or fingernails, which were dirty and broken. Her stylishly cut hair hung in sweat-soaked

strands around her eyes. In this state she looked pitifully young, too young to be in a prison. There were dark shadows under her eyes.

But it was her demeanour that shocked him the most. She had the cowed look of a beaten dog.

'Sit down, Ruby,' he said.

Ruby slumped into the hard wooden chair on the other side of the desk. He felt like a headmaster about to discipline a confused teenager. Sophistication was stripped away quickly in a prison, he thought. Hers was just a paper façade anyway.

Keelan also sat down. He took out his cigarettes and offered her one. She accepted it gratefully. Her hands were shaking, he noticed. 'How's it going, Ruby?'

'Great, John. You?'

Still sounded cocky enough. He heard they had threatened her with an Article Twenty-seven. Hardly surprising. Seven units of horse. Holy Christ. 'You got yourself some trouble, Ruby.'

'Maybe they let me off for first offence?'

'Hey, maybe.' He wanted to reach out and touch her, comfort her. She looked so fragile. Careful, he reminded himself. Don't forget who you're dealing with here. 'Seven units. That's a hell of a lot.'

'Not as percentage of the total harvest. Got to keep this in perspective, John. What you doing here, okay?' she said.

'You sent for me, Ruby. You gave my name to the Thais when they arrested you.' When she did not answer, he murmured. 'You really are in big shit here.'

Ruby slumped forward, put her forehead on the desk. She folded her hands into fists and covered her head. 'Got to be crazy to live like this, John. Just got to be crazy. Can't ever trust nobody, everybody want to rip you off. Getting pretty damn tired of this life.'

'You told Colonel Ramawong you were my informant.'

'Help me, John.'

'I can't help you, Ruby.'

'Please.'

'First I have to know: are you going to help *me*?'

She raised her head from the table. 'What you want?'

'I want Eddie Lau. And I want his supplier in Bangkok.'

Ruby shook her head. 'He kill me for sure, John.'

'If you don't help me, I can't help you.'

'Want to help you. Just scared, heya. No shit.'

'I understand you're scared. But I can't do anything unless you make the move. It's up to you.'

Ruby's shoulders sagged. A fat tear rolled down her cheek. 'Life is just bullshit.'

'Ruby, let me help you. If you give me Eddie Lau, we can do a deal. He's the one we're after.'

'Can never do that, John.'

Keelan leaned forward and picked up her hand. 'Ruby, there's something I don't think you understand. This was not just a lucky bust. The DEA in Bangkok have been watching you for over a month. You've been under constant surveillance. We know you've been doing deals with the Corsican, Crocé. But he's careful. He never goes near the heroin himself and Thailand has no conspiracy law so they can't touch him. But Eddie Lau's another story. You know where he is and you can probably bring him some place we can get him.'

She shook her head.

'You'll be protected. I promise you'

'Think about it, maybe.'

'You don't have time to think about it.'

'Eddie Lau going to kill me if I do this no matter where I run! Easy for you, John, not so easy for me!'

'Maybe not. But here's something else you can think about. Remember it was the Thais who picked you up. Eddie Lau doesn't have any friends in the police here. They arrested you to take some of the heat out of our investigation. Here you are, thinking Eddie will save you to stop you from talking. But what if you talk and nobody wants to listen? What if they all decide it's easier to take you out and shoot you'

Ruby covered her face. 'Cannot help you, cannot! Have to take a risk. Other way, I die for sure!'

Keelan stood up and called for the guards.

'In too deep now,' Ruby said.

'You can still get out.'

Ruby gave him a pitying look. 'Get out when I go to heaven, maybe not even then.'

'You're not going to heaven, Ruby.'

'Why not? What I ever do that is so bad?'

'There's not enough hours of daylight left to go through all that,' Keelan said.

The two guards came in and Ruby got to her feet.

'Stay in touch,' Keelan said.

Ruby was ushered out, dwarfed between the two guards. She turned around once and her tear-streaked face glared back at him in accusation, as if it was all his fault.

Keelan wanted to pound his fists against the wall in frustration. Well, he'd give her a few more days to stew. The Agency hadn't brought him here to Bangkok for no reason. She was their big chance and they all knew it. Somehow, they had to break her down.

59

'They have dropped Article Twenty-seven,' Prassaran said.

It had been three weeks since her arrest. Ruby sagged against the mesh grille. 'Now they cannot shoot me, okay?'

'Not legally,' Prassaran said, carefully.

So Keelan was wrong. They would not use Article Twenty-seven to silence her. 'When you getting me out of here?'

The lawyer held a perfumed handkerchief to his nose. 'The *klongs* are bad today,' he said. 'This heat is terrible.'

'When you getting me out of here?' Ruby repeated.

'I am doing everything I can, Miss Wen. But you must understand, please, that your case has attracted a lot of interest. Especially, I might add, your *brief* case.' He smiled at his own little joke. Ruby did not laugh. 'Seven kilograms of a prohibited narcotic substance is not an inconsequential amount, not something that may be resolved overnight. Now we have Article Twenty-seven out of the way . . .'

'Why doesn't Eddie just pay the money, heya?'

'Mister Lau is most anxious that you do not become impatient.'

'Tell him he is the scaly penis of a dead leper.'

The assistant grinned. Prassaran frowned and mopped at the perspiration on his face. 'I shall most certainly not convey that sentiment to him. However I shall inform him that you are growing frustrated at the delays. Is there anything you need?'

'Champagne,' Ruby said.

'I can get you champagne but not the ice,' Prassaran said, and smiled thinly at his own wit. 'Trust us, Miss Wen. We will soon have you out of this place. I am sure this period has been most unpleasant for you.'

Ruby felt her shoulders sag. The diarrhoea and the heat

had squeezed the flesh and the juice right out of her. She felt like skin and bone.

'Keep your pecker up,' Prassaran said, and left, his acolyte hurrying along behind, the attaché case clutched in both arms.

When she got back to the prison yard Sumalee grabbed her and pushed her against a wall. 'What your fancy lawyer say?'

'Thinks I will get off with ten hours community service.'

Sumalee pinched her arm tighter, and Ruby winced with pain. 'Got a message from Louis Huu.'

'Don't think I know him. Good with faces, can never remember names.'

Sumalee grabbed Ruby's chin and squeezed hard. 'Listen. He says that if you tell him where he can find Eddie Lau, he will have you released in twenty-four hours.'

'If I don't?'

'Then you will rot in here. Anything your friend pays to get you out, he will pay more to keep you here. You understand?'

Sumalee let her go.

Ruby sagged to her haunches. She wanted to weep. No way out now. No way out at all for Ruby Wen.

Nancy had paid Sumalee to buy her a ball point pen from the markets. Now, as Ruby watched, she scraped the metal nib on the cement floor of the cell until the tiny bearing fell out. Most of the ink emptied onto the floor and her sarong.

'What are you doing?' Ruby asked her.

'Don't want to catch AIDS, hon,' she said. She produced a foil wrap from her shirt and carefully diluted the powder in a little water. Then she sucked the solution up through the tube, and held it there, her thumb over the end of the pen. She examined her arm and tapped on a vein with her forefinger to make it more pronounced. Then she jabbed the sharpened metal point of the pen through her skin.

Ruby winced.

Nancy blew in the other end of the tube, forcing the heroin solution into the vein.

When she pulled out the plastic tube blood seeped down her arm. Nancy no longer cared. She shuddered with the rush of the drug flooding her system.

Soong, the *chiu chao*, was watching her. She held out a little piece of foil. 'You want to try?' she said in Thai. 'Smoke is more better for you, I think.'

Ruby shook her head. She thought about Keelan. He would have liked to see this.

60

The days were endless, a stultifying procession of heat and lethargy. The worst of the dry season heat was over, but the stench from the canals and the *hong nam* and the dried fish the Thais were so fond of still pervaded everything.

It was the middle of the afternoon. Ruby was hunched on the verandah, watching the heat rise in waves from the earth compound. On the guard towers soldiers armed with Springfield bolt action rifles sucked soft drinks from plastic bags through straws. She started to doze.

She felt something crawling over her foot. She opened an eye. It was a cockroach, a huge one, its antennae poking at the air.

By now she had grown accustomed to them. Her hand snaked out and grasped it in one movement. She felt it writhing and struggling in her fist. She went over to Soong and kicked her awake.

'What do you want?' Soong muttered.

Ruby held out her fist. 'Fastest cockroach in the world,' she said in Cantonese. 'Bet you twenty baht you do not have a cockroach that can run faster.'

'Crazy woman.'

'Twenty baht.'

Soong thought about it. Greed got the better of her, as Ruby knew it would. Doesn't matter if it's drugs or drink or gambling, Ruby thought. One addict knows another right away. Soong went back into the cell. There was no shortage of cockroaches near the *hong nam*.

She returned a few minutes later, her hands clutched into fists at her chest. Ruby was waiting for her at the bottom of the verandah steps. 'Race from here to the water trough.'

Soong sat down on the bottom step. 'Count to three,' she said.

Ruby squatted beside her. 'One . . . two . . . now!' She bent down and opened her fist. The cockroach leaped from its prison and darted away across the dirt.

Soong's roach tried to escape to the shadows under the verandah. Soong howled in rage and scooped it out. But every time she kicked it away across the compound it veered back towards its intended hiding place.

Finally, in rage, Soong stamped on it.

Ruby had coaxed hers towards the trough. She gave it a final flick with her foot and it landed with a soft click against the cement sides. 'Twenty baht,' she said.

'You cheated,' Soong said. 'I saw you.'

Ruby got on her hands and knees and grabbed the stunned insect before it could scurry away. 'Want to try again? You win this time we're even, okay. Otherwise you pay me forty baht, heya.'

Soong thought about it. She went back inside the cell to find another roach.

By the end of the afternoon there were cockroach races all over the women's compound. Even Sumalee, the chief guard, joined in. She won consistently with a big, black beast she called Prince Rama, and Ruby Wen lost all the money she had taken from Soong. Then Soong herself produced an inconsequential brown insect that proved to be a flyer, and Sumalee lost the five hundred baht she had won and another five hundred of her own money. She was furious and refused to pay. She trod on both roaches and ordered all the prisoners back to their cells for the rest of the afternoon, where they moaned and sweated in the heat and the stench of the *hong nams*.

It was the end of the cockroach racing.

61

Nancy was curled on the floor of the cell, her teeth chattering, her body shiny with sweat. Her eyes were raw slits. One of the Swiss girls was crouched next to her.

'What is the matter wif her?' Ruby said.

'What you think's the matter, fancy pants?' the Swiss said, in her heavily accented English.

'She's sick,' her friend said.

'Needs some dope.'

Ruby knelt down next to Nancy and stroked her wet hair from her face. The American girl seemed not to see her. 'You can help her?'

'Not giving her any of my stash,' the Swiss girl said. 'Her own fault, I warn her. She has lose all her money playing the stupid cockroach game.'

Ruby remembered the wet cloth on her forehead when she was sick. The *gwailo* had been her only friend in here. She pulled Nancy towards her, laid the American girl's head on her lap. Getting soft, Ruby-ah, going stupid in the head! Just a dirty *gwailo* hippie, okay.

'Maybe you can buy for her,' one of the Swiss girls said.

'Cannot. Lose all my money too.'

'So stupid,' the Swiss girl said, and went back to her corner of the cell. Ruby watched her take an alfoil twist from her pocket and a syringe from her little pack of belongings. She shrugged at Ruby.

Ruby called out to Soong. 'Need some chicken for this number four girl,' Ruby said.

Soong grinned. She produced a twist of alfoil from her shirt and held it out to her.

Ruby reached out, but Soong snatched her hand away. 'Three hundred baht.'

'Lose everything to Sumalee. Can pay you back, okay.'

'Got to pay me now.'

'She is sick!'

'Not my problem,' Soong said, and she went back to her corner.

'I piss on your grandfather's bones!' Ruby hissed at her.

Both Swiss girls lay slumped against the far wall, lost in their opiate dreams, while Ruby held Nancy through the long, baking night, as she shivered and thrashed and cried out, fighting the demons who would not let her body rest.

Ruby cradled and gentled Nancy through the worst of the nightmares, and she was still awake when the dirty violent stain of a Bangkok dawn crept up the sky through the barred windows. And then, suddenly, exhaustion overtook her and she fell into a black and empty sleep.

Patpong

Morning in Patpong. David Lee's Landcruiser was parked down the road from the 69 bar. Lee was sitting behind the wheel, smoking; Keelan had his window open, trying not to.

'That's where he does all his business,' Lee said.

'*Soixante-neuf*. Good French name.'

'Crocé still has contacts inside Laos. There's quite a few Corsicans still living inside Vientiane, it's like the British old boy network with garlic.'

Keelan laughed. 'So it's mainly Laotian heroin.'

'That's what we figure. Though he also has good contacts in the Thai military and the Border Police. But he's not one of the major players in Bangkok. Five *chiu chao* Chinese run the business here. There's a rumour that Eddie Lau ran foul of one of them, that's why he went to Crocé.'

'How long have you had Ruby under surveillance?'

'Ever since she got to Bangkok. Couldn't believe our luck when we saw her get into this rented Toyota and drive off. We figured it had to be a delivery. She got careless, that's all.'

'You think it was Crocé's heroin?'

'She's spent a lot of time in the bar. Plus she's been sleeping with Crocé's son. It's all very cosy.'

'Do we know how she's been shipping the product out of Thailand?'

'We were hoping you'd be able to enlighten us there. The Thais found boxes of *mien lap* – they're these padded jackets the Chinese wear – in her apartment. They must be part of the system. Maybe she sews the heroin into the linings and ships them out. But we don't know where to.'

Something wasn't right here, Keelan thought. They had come at this from the wrong angle. 'What about that telex you sent us on this case a couple of months ago? The lead on the trawler and Eddie Lau. Where did that come from?'

'One of our CI's.'

I wonder, Keelan thought. Perhaps the information originated from Louis Huu, a pay-back aimed at Eddie Lau after their falling out?

'Hey, here's Crocé now,' Lee said.

A black Mercedes pulled into an alley beside the 69. A few moments later a tall, sallow man in a black suit and open-necked white silk shirt appeared. The rope of gold around his neck glinted in the morning sun. He was smoking a cigarette.

The most arresting thing about him was the black eyepatch over his left eye. But he was not as robust as Keelan had expected; he had the look and demeanour of an ageing gigolo.

Keelan told Lee what he thought. Lee laughed. 'Truer than you know. I hear he was a pretty good-looking guy when he was younger. Since then there's been too many late nights, too much of his life in bars. He's also pretty sick, I hear.'

Crocé disappeared through the door of 69's.

'He's pretty well untouchable here,' Lee said. 'He'd never go near the heroin himself. It's the other end we can bust them. When the stuff gets to the States. And Ruby has the key to that.'

'I'll keep the pressure on her.'

'Pity she hasn't got balls. We could twist them for her.'

Keelan gave him a grim smile. 'What makes you so sure she hasn't?'

62

Maha Chai

When she woke it was already late morning. She stumbled outside, her clothes soaked with Nancy's sweat. There was a crowd gathered at the end of the verandah. Soong sat cross-legged in the midst of them, the other Asian prisoners clustered around her, their faces cast in the empty stares that Ruby recognised from thousands of gambling halls. She went closer.

Soong had drawn a chalk square on the verandah, the square itself divided into four quadrants. Little piles of bank notes had been tossed into each of the squares. To one side lay a small pyramid of rambutan and lychee stones. Soong scooped some up with her tin rice bowl and then proceeded to count these out into lines of four.

When she had done, she announced the result, pulling some of the notes towards her, tossing money back at the winners.

Fan tan.

Ruby's mouth was gummy, she felt greasy with dirt and dried sweat. She went to the trough, and put her head into the water. There was a nagging pain in her temples.

Fan tan.

She felt in the breast pocket of her shirt, found the ragged twenty baht note that was all the money she had left after the cockroach races, everything she had until the next visit by Prassaran or his assistant. She was drawn irresistibly to the crowd around Soong. One last bet.

She shouldered her way into the huddle and tossed the note into the square with its crude chalk mark in Sanskrit and Chinese:

Two.

She watched as Soong once again scooped up a pile of the fruit stones with the bowl and began to count them out with the flat of her hand in an easy practised motion. Ruby's face betrayed nothing, but inside she made her gambler's prayer to her ancestors and her Chinese gods to favour her over the other women clustered around her.

It was over in less than a minute. Soong finished counting. Two stones left.

Ruby left her winnings in the square, and the game began again.

She knew the odds. No matter what game you play, odds always against you, she thought. But does not matter about odds, if you have good luck. If gods want you to win, never can lose.

She won again.

A third time.

More of the prisoners wandered over to watch, even the two Swiss girls, like schoolboys coming to watch a playground fight. There was a tension in the game now that had not been there before. Soong and Ruby avoided each other's eyes.

In fact, Ruby was scarcely aware of Soong's presence. She was in a long dark tunnel and did not even notice the murmuring around her as her pile of notes grew. She pushed her stake to three, then to one, then back to three. She kept winning. Six times in a row. It was impossible, against all odds.

She could not hear or see the crowd pressed around her. She was deeper into the tunnel, just her and the game and the tiger; the tiger called Luck.

Soong hesitated. Her own bank was almost broken. The other women were betting with Ruby now. One more win would finish her.

A voice told Ruby to take the money. But she could not pull away now that she felt the golden presence of the god of gamblers on her shoulder. The money no longer mattered. All she knew was that she did not want to come back; back to the prison, to the heat, to the stench, to the misery. To

Prassaran and Louis Huu. To Keelan. She wanted to remain here in this netherworld where she was full of luck and power and she could do anything, heya. Where she could feel the breath of the gods on her face, the prescient dawn of her own magic.

Could not stop now, heya. She pushed her stake to her lucky number, two.

Soong quickly divided up the small pyramid of fruit stones in front of her.

It had to be a two . . .

The last few stones.

A rustling sigh passed through the crowd, soft, almost inaudible, like breeze through the trees. Soong's face betrayed no emotion.

Two left.

Ruby had won.

Without a word Soong paid off the game, stood up and walked away. All the money she had made from her drug deals had gone in less than half an hour.

Ruby clutched the pile of notes in her fist. Nobody spoke to her or touched her. They all simply drifted away, the contest over.

Ruby felt a black gnawing of disappointment. She had won, beaten impossible odds; no matter it was a crude fan tan game played for a few thousand baht. But now the game was over and the spell was broken. Already she felt the gods slipping silently away . . .

Nancy screamed inside the cell. Nancy. She had forgotten about Nancy.

She ran after Soong, caught her halfway across the compound. She thrust a handful of notes at her. 'Here,' she said. 'Now I can pay you for the powder for my number four lady, okay.'

Ruby used the syringe to draw the water from the trough. She emptied it into a tin cup and brought it into the cell. Nancy lay on the floor, her eyes rolling in her head, fitting. The spasm passed and she lay on her back, twitching, her breath raling in her chest.

Ruby opened the little twist of foil and emptied the white powder into the cup, where it quickly dissolved in the water. She drew the solution back into the syringe.

She studied Nancy's arms. Scabs marched up her forearm to her elbow, a few of them turned to running sores from the filthy needle. Her ankles were the same.

Nancy moaned and arched her back.

It would have to be her arm. Ruby removed the belt from her shorts and used it as a tourniquet, distending the veins. Her own hands were shaking. She had never done this before. Heroin had only ever been a powder in a plastic bag, a commodity to buy or sell like rice or gold or tapioca.

Can never go back to that old life after this, she thought.

It was more difficult to push a needle into an arm than she thought. Especially this blunt needle. Finally she felt the soft pop as the needle broke the skin and pierced the damaged vein. Ruby emptied out the syringe. Nancy groaned and twisted with the first rush, then vomited on the floor.

When she was done her breathing slowed, and the trembling in her limbs faded to stillness. Ruby had bought Nancy her peace.

Ruby thought about Eddie. She almost wished he could see her now, feeding little four into the arm of a *gwailo* junkie. Would laugh if he knew, she thought. Would probably think it is all very funny.

63

It was the worst time of the monsoon, the heat rose in solid waves from the earth. When Ruby had arrived at Maha Chai the compound had been baked hard, and the grit and dust had stung her eyes and parched her throat. Now it was a sea of mud, the air was ripe and damp and the whole world smelled of wet blotting paper.

In the four months she had been in Maha Chai, Ruby had become fastidious about washing. Sometimes she would bathe up to four times a day. It didn't matter that she was soaked with sweat again within a few minutes of bathing, or that she could never seem to get the grease and soiling of the prison off her skin. It kept up her personal morale. If she could not have her beautiful clothes and her cosmetics and her colognes at least she would be clean. She would not let Keelan or Prassaran or Lucien – if he ever came back – see her broken. Not again.

The women bathed by stripping off their clothes by the cement trough in the compound. Ruby no longer worried about the guards laughing and watching from the tower. Let them look all they want. She stripped off her T-shirt and shorts and stood naked in the mud while she ladled the water over her head.

She was drying herself off with an old sarong when she heard shouts. She looked up and saw Sumalee and two of the women guards kicking their way through the prisoners who were huddled together on the verandah.

They stopped and clustered around Nancy. Sumalee sorted through her bed-roll and the pathetic pile of belongings. The guards were in the habit of making intermittent searches for drugs and weapons. Perhaps it was the Governor's idea, or perhaps they did it out of boredom. Only Soong was

never searched because she had enough money to pay them off.

Sumalee gave an angry shout. She had found Nancy's little stash of heroin.

Ruby heard Nancy scream as the two guards beat her over the shoulders with their batons, kicking at her with their heavy black military boots. Ruby struggled back into her clothes. So unfair. Everyone had drugs in Maha Chai.

'Stop it!' she shouted.

When she reached the verandah one of the Swiss girls grabbed her arm. 'It will only be bad for you,' she hissed at her. 'If you try to stop, they beat you also!'

Ruby tore free and ran into the mêlée, tried to pull Nancy away. She felt a stinging blow across her back, and she dropped to her knees. Sumalee stood over her, her baton raised. She brought it down across her shoulders and Ruby screamed. Ruby twisted away, but still managed to grab Nancy's arm and pull her away from the boots.

Sumalee uttered a scream of rage and the next blow landed on Ruby's head. It was as if she had been jolted with an electric current. The world went white, and an appalling pain flashed through her skull. The baton blows rained down on her back, her shoulders, the backs of her legs, until she no longer had the strength to try and avoid them.

Nancy's skin was damp and cold. She was breathing too fast. Ruby let her head rest on her lap, and stroked back her hair. She gently unbuttoned Nancy's shirt. There were liver-coloured bruises all over her body where the guards had kicked her. Ruby felt Nancy's stomach. It was rock hard on one side.

She was terribly pale. There was a pulpy bruise over one eye where one of the guards had kicked her, and the broken blood vessel had bled into her right eye, discolouring it.

Somehow she would have to get antibiotics from Prassaran for Nancy's face. Her lip was torn and it would get badly infected in here.

Ruby wondered if she looked as bad. She could feel where the dried blood had encrusted in her hair from the blows of

Sumalee's baton. Her head hammered with pain. She had no idea how long she had been unconscious. Every time she moved her body there was a sudden racking pain in her back. Perhaps die tomorrow, Ruby thought. Die for this hippie *gwailo*. Eddie-ah really love to see this, heya.

Nancy's eyes flickered. 'How ya doin', fancy pants.' She tried to smile and some watery blood leaked down her chin from her torn lip.

'Doing okay,' Ruby said.

'You're a pal,' Nancy said.

Ruby leaned her head very gently against the wall and closed her eyes. She felt around her mouth with her tongue. Lost no teeth, okay. Hurt to breathe, perhaps broken rib. Cannot know what damage they had done inside her head.

Pain was so bad . . .

Nancy was snoring. Ruby opened her eyes. Nancy's colour was bad, like incense ash. She tried to shake her awake. 'Nan.' She shook harder, pinched her ear lobes. She pulled at her eyelid. Her eyes had rolled right back in her head. 'Nan!'

One of the Swiss girls crawled across the cell. 'Is she all right?'

'Cannot talk,' Ruby said. 'Maybe something wrong. More better we call the guard.'

'They never come. Not at night.'

'Have to come. Nan must go to the hospital.'

'They never unlock the door before morning.'

'Try!' Ruby said. She could hardly move her own body for the racking pain in her head and her back.

The Swiss girl stood up and banged on the door, over and over. One of the guards peered through the barred window. 'Help us,' Ruby shouted in Thai. 'My friend is really sick. Has to go to the hospital.'

The face disappeared. Ruby thought she had gone to fetch the keys but after long minutes still no one came.

'I told you, they never unlock the doors at night,' the Swiss girl said. 'They don't care if she die. They will say it was drug that kill her.'

'Told you not to try and interfere,' the other Swiss girl said. 'You just make the beating worse.'

'Why did they do this?' Ruby said.

'Someone informed on her.' One of the Swiss looked across the cell at Soong. 'She owed Soong money for heroin.'

Soong stared back impassively.

'Why they never beat Soong, heya?'

'She has a rich protector on the outside. I heard it is the prime minister's own cousin.'

Nancy started to heave. Ruby thought she was coming out of her stupor, but instead she started to vomit. Ruby twisted her sideways onto the floor. The rest of the women in the cell shouted in protest.

'As if it doesn't stink enough in here,' the Swiss girl said.

That night a monsoon storm pounded on the tin roof and sheets of tropical rain slanted in through the bars. The floor began to flood. Ruby had to squat, the water lapping around her ankles, Nancy's body resting on her knees to keep her clear of the foul and ankle-deep water. Ruby's legs began to cramp and the pain from her bruised shoulders and back was torture. The rest of the prisoners stood, clutching their bundles of possessions. Ruby knew her own clothes were being soaked and fouled but there was nothing she could do.

Mosquitoes feasted on her ankles and arms, driven frantic by the heat and the damp and the smell of warm blood. Ruby did not even have the strength left to slap them away.

The night stretched on, endless, without form or shape. Ruby squatted in the filth, Nancy's head cradled on her lap, enduring the misery of the insects and the water and the pain of the beating in a half conscious state where sudden bright dreams provided vivid relief from the long, exhausted hours of the night.

But in the morning when the guards finally opened the door, she was unable to escape her place of torment. Her leg muscles had cramped and locked underneath her.

The other women rushed out into the steaming sunshine,

gasping at the air like beached fish. They had stood right through the night and now they collapsed on the verandah, exhausted. Finally only the two Swiss girls remained.

'Are you all right?' one of them asked her.

Ruby had no feeling left in her cramped legs, and the pain in her back was so bad she knew she could not move without help. She felt like stone. 'You help me?' she murmured. 'Must stand up now.'

One of the girls dragged Nancy onto the verandah while the other helped Ruby to her feet. As she stood up and the blood flowed back into her legs the pain made her cry out.

The other Swiss girl returned and the two of them half dragged her, half carried her out of the cell.

'Is Nan all right?' she whispered.

'Yes, she's all right now,' one of the girls said. 'She's dead.'

64

Soong had on a new sarong and a pink blouse. She appeared on the verandah with the complacent, beatific expression that reminded Ruby of the ceramic representations of Kuan Yi, Goddess of Mercy.

'Goodbye, Wen Shui–Ming.' she said.

Ruby did not answer her. Her back still ached unmercifully from the beating, and since Nancy had died she had not bothered to eat. Going to die in here, she had decided. Just like Nan.

But Soong wanted a reaction. 'Today I go to court, for sentencing,' Soong said. 'They will set me free. Everything is arranged. My cousin paid the bribe. Two million baht.'

'Goodbye, Soong,' Ruby said.

'Sorry about your friend. Never meant for her to die. It's too bad.'

'Hope you are run over by a truck and rot slowly on the road while ants eat your fingers.'

Soong shrugged. 'Nan still owe me nine hundred baht, Wen Shui–Ming. Can make a lot of trouble for you with Sumalee. Want to pay me Nan's debt before I go?'

'Got no money,' Ruby lied.

'Too bad for you,' Soong said.

An hour later the guards came to escort her to the prison van that would take her to the courthouse. 'Too bad for you!' she repeated, and waved as she went through the gates.

Later that afternoon Soong was back. She did not speak to anyone. She went straight to the cell and sat in the corner, staring at the wall. The judge had given her the death sentence.

Patpong

For his father's birthday, Lucien took Baptiste to the Bussaracum restaurant in the Dusit Thani Hotel. It was a place of sybaritic elegance, of carved hardwoods and snow-white linen, blue-and-white china, brass flatware.

The food was typically Thai, sensual, detailed, exquisite. They ate lavender-coloured dumplings, stuffed with tender chicken that had been worked into the shape of flowers; sautéed heart of palm; a lemon-flavoured prawn soup, served in a clay pot and kept hot by a lighted candle; grilled sliced prawns served in a sculpted squash with shredded fried catfish.

It was while they were waiting for dessert that Lucien raised the subject of business. 'Papa, how much did we make from number four this year?'

Baptiste looked surprised at the question. 'I don't know. I do not count any more. Probably I make more from my bar in Patpong. Why?'

'In Bangkok one kilo is worth maybe two hundred thousand baht. In the US the same kilo is worth three and a half million baht.'

'Yes, but first you have to get the one kilo to America. There is too much risk and too much organisation. I leave all that to the Chinese *voyous*.'

'Why not let me take care of that part of the business?'

Baptiste laughed. He lit another cigarette. *Merde*, he can't leave them alone, Lucien thought. Even when he's eating. All his food must taste like shit.

'You carry one suitcase and now you are an expert. The next Mister Asia, or I don't know what!'

Lucien was not fazed. 'I was thinking about this company you set up, to export exotic animals to zoos in Europe and America.'

'A sideline, that's all. After you've been in Asia for a while, you get involved in all sorts of shit. But you know how much I make on one snake?'

'You could make a lot more.'

Baptiste stared at his son. Perhaps this was the revelation he had waited for. 'I'm listening, Luc.'

'You send a shipment of snakes to a private zoo in America. We have all the proper customs clearances. The company is well established, it's a legitimate business. Except the next time we send a crate of poisonous snakes out of the country we put inside a hollow log filled with heroin. What customs officer is going to put his hand inside? Last year we sent a tiger to a zoo in Arizona. We could hide several kilos in the bottom of the tiger's cage. Who's going to check? Is some customs guy going to put on a rubber glove and ask the tiger to bend over?'

Baptiste smiled. This was a side of his son he had not seen before. So, his instinct about him had been right, after all.

Sorry, Noelle.

'It's possible. But you need to make connections in the US who have money and who aren't the DEA. That is difficult. And I cannot go, it is too dangerous for me to leave Thailand now. My face is too well known to the *flics*. Besides, my idiot of a doctor would not let me fly.'

'I can do it, papa. Let me try.'

The desserts arrived. It appeared to be a plate of cherries and tiny pears; but when Lucien put one in his mouth he discovered it was mung bean paste, dipped and glazed and subtly flavoured with jasmine; the cherry leaves were papaya; the pears were actually pineapples, also brilliantly disguised.

Baptiste was smiling at him. 'Something else I have learned in Asia,' he said, 'is that nothing is ever quite as it appears. What people seem to be, what they really are. You never know until you bite deep.'

65

Maha Chai

Keelan stood by the window in the ante-room of the governor's office, looking over the men's compound. The place stinks of misery, he thought. Men were crowded into the compound below, a shuffling, hawking, hunched mass of lost souls.

How did he get here? What was he doing walking the lonely corridors through these vistas of suffering? He had grown up in Berkeley, gone to baseball games at Candlestick Park, shooting baskets with his old man in the back yard of their house with his two brothers. His father had been an insurance assessor, his brothers both worked in desk jobs. They all thought he was slightly crazy. The events of the last two years had suggested to him that they were right.

Keelan still did not know what had drawn him to the police force. When he left college and announced his intentions to his parents they had stared at him open-mouthed, as if he had declared a vocation for the priesthood. Which in many ways he had. Police work was a calling, a sacrifice. And he had sacrificed more than most.

For so long it had just been a game. He had continued his quiet suburban life, each day entering the darker depths of the world to do his job. He had once seen a fourteen-year-old boy running through a San Francisco street with a Thompson sub-machine gun; he had arrested and interviewed sixteen-year-old girls who had acted as holsters for their boyfriends in criminal gangs and who had seen more action than a Vietnam veteran. He had stared into the cold eyes of killers and felt as if he was staring into the bottom of the ocean; men whom he believed, despite what his pastor

had said, had no soul, no goodness, no spark of humanity resident there.

He had experienced whatever it was that drove other men to religion; a confrontation with evil. He now believed that there were people out there who were irretrievable predators, who had no sense of right and wrong. Blood, pain, anguish – nothing registered. He had met twelve-year-olds with nothing in their eyes. Nobody home.

And then one day, he was no longer peering in from the outside. He volunteered for undercover work, and became two people; living and acting and thinking like a drug dealer during the day, a part of the sordid and desperate life of the streets; and at night going to suburban dinner parties, mowing his square of lawn and playing out the life of a family man. He had thought he could keep both worlds separate.

Until the day the underlife had followed him home.

Having forfeited one of his lives, there was now no option but to retreat into the other. Which was why he supposed he now found himself sitting in a stinking Oriental prison, bargaining for souls.

He looked up as she was escorted through the door. Holy Christ. What had they been doing to her now?

'Ruby?' he said. 'Are you all right?'

She almost fell into the wooden chair. Keelan walked behind her, pulled back the neck of her T-shirt. Her back was mottled with the custard-yellow and purple marks of decaying bruises. There was a long raised scab in her hair, covered with a fine sprinkling of antibiotic powder.

'Should have seen the other girl, John.'

'They beat you,' he said.

'What else they do in prison? Cannot take away their fun. Be very boring if they don't beat you, okay.'

He sat on the edge of the desk, looking down at her. 'You don't have to go through all this.'

'Can get me out?'

'If you co-operate.'

'What a nice girl like me have to do to keep you happy?'

'Let's not play any more games, Ruby. I want you to tell me everything you know about Baptiste Crocé, about Louis

Huu, about Eddie Lau, about every deal you've done. Where the heroin comes from, where it goes to, the works.'

'If I tell you, can tell the judge to let me go, okay?'

'It's not quite as easy as that.'

Ruby leaned forward, her arms hugged about her chest. 'Sick of this life. Really sick of this.'

'You can trust me.'

'Can never trust yellow air.'

Keelan wanted to shake her. Look, stupid, they've abandoned you! Eddie Lau, Baptiste Crocé, the rest of them, they've abandoned you in here! I am your only way out of this hell hole!

'What else I have to do?' she asked him.

'You may have to be prepared to go to court, to testify.'

'This is Thailand, John. I say I will testify against Louis Huu, they kill me in here for sure.'

'I don't want you to testify here. In the United States.' When she did not answer he reached forward and lifted her face. 'You've got so many choices, Ruby? You had any better offers lately?'

'Yeah, okay, might as well cut my own throat, heya.'

'We can protect you.'

Ruby was silent for a long time, her head hanging on her chest.

'Let's start off with one simple question. How did Eddie Lau know there was an arrest warrant out for him in Hong Kong?'

'Because I tell him.'

'And how did you find out?'

'*Feng shui* man.'

Keelan got to his feet. 'Okay, that's it. I'm getting the guards.'

Ruby jerked upright. 'Okay, John tell you, okay? Was your good friend, Mac.'

Keelan stared at her. 'That's bullshit.'

'Not bullshit, tell you for true.'

Keelan felt physically sick. Not McReadie. He trusted McReadie. He was a friend. 'I don't believe you.'

'Don't care what you believe, no shit.'

'Why?'

Ruby held up her thumb and index finger and rubbed them together. 'Why anyone do anything, heya?'

There are some questions better left unanswered. 'I don't believe you,' Keelan repeated.

Ruby shrugged her shoulders, pouting.

'All right, we'll get back to that. First tell me about the seven units of heroin.'

'*Mien lap*,' she said. 'Chinese padded jackets.'

'What?'

'Sew the powder into the lining of the jacket. Little bit in each jacket, how anyone going to know? Send air freight to Shenzhen.'

'Shenzhen City? Is that where Eddie Lau ran to?'

She stared at the floor, making up her mind. If she was going to give up Eddie Lau, she had to decide now.

'Ruby?'

She nodded her head.

'Wait a minute . . .' Keelan said. He sat down behind the desk and took a yellow legal pad and a pen from his briefcase. He pushed his cigarettes across the desk to Ruby, who lit one. 'Okay. Let's go.'

'Make the deal with Crocé . . .' She pronounced it Kwo-chao. 'Then we arrange pick-up . . .'

'How?'

'He says go such and such place. Then they call me on mobile service. Give me registration number of car. Keys taped under steering wheel, exhaust maybe. Little four in suitcase in the boot of the car.'

'And you sew the stuff into the padded jackets.'

'Repack in boxes, send air freight to Guanzhou. Eddie arranges pick up, brings back to Shenzhen . . .'

'Slow down.'

'Cannot slow down. Way I talk. You write faster.'

'Okay, go on.'

'Has textile factory in Shekhou City. Jackets are sent to United States, through Hong Kong, as part of very big consignment. Very hard to find. Got to rip open many jacket to find the little four.'

'What's the name of the factory in Shekhou?'

'Friendship Textile on Nanshan Lu.'

Keelan stopped writing. He stared at what he had written. 'Perhaps we could talk to the Chinese,' he said, thinking aloud.

'Can talk all you want. Have a saying in Canton. The mountains are high and the emperor is a long way away. Shenzhen is not part of China, Shenzhen is part of Shenzhen.'

'All right, Ruby, let me ask you. If we got Eddie on US soil, we could arrest his ass.'

'Eddie-ah never be so stupid.'

'Maybe he could be stupid for you.'

'Does not even come to Bangkok for his Ruby-ah. Why you think he will come to Golden Mountain?'

'We have to find a way to get him out of China.'

'Never happen.'

It might, Keelan thought, if we have you as bait. And you could bait a hook for more than one fish. David Lee had told him that Crocé had not left Thailand for years, but Louis Huu was another matter. According to US Immigration records he visited the West Coast at least every six months. If they could get him in a US courtroom and put Ruby Wen on the stand, they might get a conspiracy conviction under the RICO statutes.

'Tell me about your meetings with Mister Louis Huu.'

'First you get me out of here.'

'No, first you agree to testify in the United States. Then we'll see what we can do.'

'Tell you too much already.'

'Shit, we go to the Thais, we tell them about Crocé, know what's going to happen? Nothing. If he's not holding, we don't have a thing. The Thais don't have a conspiracy law. Eddie Lau's over the border in Shenzhen. He's probably bought off the local cops, nothing we can do to touch him. We don't have enough here to arrest anyone, it won't even disrupt business. All we have is a little hiccough.'

'Well, maybe hiccough to you, fucking major indigestion for Ruby Wen if Eddie find out what I tell you.'

'Did you ever have conversations with Louis Huu about importing heroin into the United States?'

'Sure,' Ruby said. 'I tell you that, okay.'

'Did he tell you where he buys his heroin, who his contacts are in the States?'

Ruby went pale. 'Maybe.'

'Come on, Ruby.'

Ruby hung her head.

'Seven keys of number four, Ruby. That's one hundred and fifty years at least. With time off for good behaviour you'll be out when you're a hundred and ten.'

'Got to think about this.'

'There's nothing to think about! You want to rot in jail, or not?'

'Okay, heya! He buys from some general.'

'What's his name?'

'Don't remember.'

'Ruby!'

'Don't remember, okay! Some guy in the BPP.'

'No shit,' Keelan said, and kept writing. The BPP were the Border Patrol Police, a CIA financed paramilitary unit ostensibly formed to stop communists and drug armies infiltrating the Thai border. 'Who are his contacts in the States?'

'Don't know that.'

'Ruby . . .'

'Don't know, okay! Don't know anything about Louis Huu in United States! Until we lose the big shipment we import into Hong Kong, ship on from there.'

Keelan tore the paper from the pad and stared at what he had written. 'Okay,' he said, 'we're going to do all this again, only we're going to be a little more precise, and I want you to give me everything you know. Exactly what was said, where and when. Okay?'

'Ruby Wen is dead,' she said.

'Trust me,' Keelan said.

Ruby remembered what her father had told her when she was a child. When you're alive don't go to the authorities, when you're dead don't go to hell. She had the terrible feeling she had just broken the first of his rules, and very soon she was going to break the other.

66

Louis Huu's residence

They passed under a road bridge. Above them the traffic tooted and snarled in its own choking fumes. Vincent was impressed. The coffee-brown canal was polluted and stank, but it was a more civilised way for a man to transport himself across the city.

The river was heavy with mud and water hyacinth, torn from the bank by the monsoon floods. Rice barges, water taxis and long wooden skiffs loaded with spiky rambutans and jackfruit shot past.

They passed under another bridge and then the *hang ya* pulled into a landing stage, seized the mooring rope and hopped onto the bank to secure it. Vincent, his briefcase clutched in his right hand, was helped ashore by a white-jacketed servant.

A large Shanghainese, muscles bulging beneath his sports shirt, oversaw the operation and led Vincent up to the house.

A winding path led from the river through a tropical garden. The house was a traditional Thai home, two storey, built from teak. Orchids hung from slatted wooden boxes from the terrace on the upper floor.

The man in the sports shirt removed his shoes at the entrance and indicated that Vincent should do the same. The inside of the house was dark and cool. It reminded Vincent of a museum. There were ancient Burmese Buddhas, wooden statuary from Cambodia, blue-and-white porcelain from China, Thai silk carpets.

Louis Huu was waiting for him upstairs on the terrace, in a smoking jacket of embroidered brocade in gold and dark blue.

He rose to meet Vincent as if he were a family friend of many years standing.

'Vincent!' he said, extending his hand. 'You do me great honour to visit my humble home.'

'It is I who am honoured,' Vincent answered.

'Come and sit down. Will you drink tea?'

The terrace overlooked the *klong*. They sat side by side and drank lemon-scented tea, while Louis made inconsequential conversation about Hong Kong and Happy Valley and a shopping centre development that he was considering in Shatin. Above their heads a slight breeze stirred the temple chimes.

He was such pleasant company that Vincent had to remind himself that this same expansive host might not let him leave Bangkok alive should the result of the meeting not be to his entire satisfaction.

Finally it was time to get down to business. 'My higher authority has sent me here to discuss a matter that is causing him great concern,' Vincent said.

'What matter is that?'

'He is anxious over misunderstandings that have occurred between you in the past. He does not want this to affect your friendship. My higher authority wants you to know that he thinks of you as an older brother.'

Louis Huu took a cigarette from a silver box on the table and fitted the end into an ivory holder. 'I am flattered by his words. What does he propose, that we can heal the wounds of the past?'

'I have in my case here a letter of credit for twenty-eight million baht to clear the question of a debt you are owed.'

Vincent flicked open the clasps on his briefcase and took out a thick manila envelope containing the letter of credit. Louis Huu studied it for a moment. 'I am happy to accept. To show my friendship I am inclined to waiver the question of interest.'

You can go defecate in your grandmother's ear for your interest, Vincent thought. 'He also wished me to convey to you his enthusiasm about renewing the relationship between you. For your mutual profit.'

'Now this troublesome matter has been resolved, I am sure our previous business can be resumed.'

A soft and golden smile of triumph.

A white-jacketed male servant brought more tea.

Finally Vincent rose to leave.

'There is one more small matter,' he said, almost as if it was an afterthought. 'My higher authority wonders if you might be able, as a friend, to offer a small measure of assistance.'

'If it is in my power.'

'My higher authority has a very dear friend who has been wrongly imprisoned in Maha Chai, here in Bangkok. Her name is Ruby Wen shui-ming. She was falsely accused of possessing certain narcotic substances. He wonders perhaps if you might intercede with the relevant authorities here in your country, and clarify this misunderstanding.'

Louis Huu looked thoughtful, as if trying to summon the details of the case from his memory. 'Ah yes, Miss Wen,' he said, remembering. 'Tell your higher authority there is no need for concern. I am reliably informed that she may well be released at any time. However, please also to tell him that a fee of three million baht may be payable to expedite the paperwork.'

Dew neh loh moh on this Ruby Wen! Three million on top of the twenty-eight they had already spent to placate this steaming pile of pig manure. It would clear almost all the cash they had on hand. For a woman!

'I will arrange the transfer first thing in the morning,' Vincent said.

67

The courthouse

Two days after her interview with John Keelan two soldiers with Smith and Wesson automatic pistols on their hips and carrying M1 rifles, came to fetch Ruby Wen from the women's compound.

'Where you taking me?' she said.

The soldiers did not answer. Ruby was marched to a small shed in the men's compound. In the middle of the shed was an anvil and a bench.

'What are you doing?' Ruby shouted.

The blacksmith did not answer her either. He selected a set of chains and ankle rings, and motioned for her to put her leg in one of the rings. The guards shoved her forward. There was no point in resisting.

She was forced to put her leg on the anvil and the blacksmith pounded the link shut with a hammer. Then he repeated the process with the other leg. The chains were too heavy for her and she could not walk in them. The blacksmith tied a piece of string to the chain so she could walk small steps by carrying the links.

Her hands were cuffed together.

She was herded through the gates onto a waiting prison bus. It was crowded with men and women prisoners and prison guards. Stragglers were persuaded to hurry by the guards' electric prods. The bus moved off. They passed through the gates and turned into the choked streets of Bangkok, crawling through the traffic to the courthouse. A monsoon storm had flooded the streets, slowing traffic even more, and the short journey took over two hours.

The courthouse was a bedlam of police, officials, weeping

relatives and reporters. The clamour of car horns and revving engines from the streets outside joined with the shouts of the officials and the weeping of prisoners' relatives to a nightmare uproar.

Ruby was shoved ahead of the guards into a courtroom. She was relieved to see Julian Prassaran. The dapper Indian lawyer stepped forward and thrust a document into her hand.

'What's this?' she said to him.

'It is the charge sheet,' he said. 'Don't worry. Everything will be all right.'

Ruby looked around. She saw Louis Huu sitting at the back of the courtroom, behind the armed police and reporters. The shadow of a smile played around his lips.

She felt as if her insides had turned to solid ice.

The judge read out the charges, then Prassaran told him they would be pleading 'not guilty' and asked for bail. The Public Prosecutor nodded his assent.

Bail was set at one million baht.

The guards hustled her towards the doors. The heavy chains made her stumble and she almost fell. 'What's happening to me?' she shouted at Prassaran.

'You are going to be released,' he called to her. 'Mister Lau has taken care of everything.' Then he thrust some papers at his assistant and nodded briefly to her. 'Good luck to you,' he said and pushed his way through the crowds. She watched his elegantly tailored back disappear. She looked around, searching for Louis Huu.

He was gone.

She was shoved down some stone stairs to the holding cells. She felt like a cork on a stormy ocean, battered and completely out of control.

The next morning Sumalee came to tell her she was to be released. Ruby no longer dared to believe. But she changed into a freshly cleaned white T-shirt and a faded blue sarong and waited. An hour later the guards came to escort her once again to the governor's office. She was told to sit outside while he finished the paperwork.

Should be happy to get out of this stinking hole! she

thought. Instead, she fought to keep down her panic. Once again she ran through the sequence of events in her mind; left to rot in prison for four months; then talks to the DEA; less than forty-eight hours later Eddie Lau has arranged for her release, and Louis Huu appears in the courtroom.

Ruby Wen, you are in big trouble, no shit. They have found out that you talked to Keelan! Maybe Eddie Lau or maybe Louis Huu. When a room is full of snakes does it matter which one that bites you?

They are going to get rid of you.

She thought about demanding to see Keelan. But what good would that do? Did she really think the Americans could help her, heya? No place safe, not in Thailand, not anywhere, not if they knew. She was on her own.

The guards escorted her to the gates. The doors slammed behind her.

Crowds pressed around her, the hubbub of hawkers and car horns and revving engines that she had heard so often beyond the high walls now pressed in on her. Someone rushed past, buffeting into her. Ruby staggered back, fighting back panic. She felt as if she had been cut adrift in a boat.

There was a black Mercedes parked on the other side of the street. The driver punched the horn and flashed the headlights. The electric window whirred down. Louis Huu waved and beckoned her over.

Has to know, Ruby thought. No other reason to get out so soon.

And so she ran, blindly, into the maze of narrow streets around the prison, past the rattan shop and the old lady baking bananas over a charcoal brazier, tipping over a basket of ginger root at a hawker's stall as she ran; into an alley of old furniture shops, into the teeming crowds and commerce of the Chinatown. She ran down narrow lanes where she knew the black Mercedes could not follow, ran until she was exhausted. Finally she collapsed onto the steps of a Chinese temple.

She gasped the air into her lungs, and tried to take stock.

She had no passport, hardly any money, no friends. She was completely alone.

And she had no idea what she should do next. All she knew was that somehow she must find her way out of Thailand.

68

Kuala Lumpur

Kuala Lumpur, like every Asian city Ruby had ever seen, was a seething mass of traffic and cosmopolitan crowds. It had risen from a mudpile of shacks just a little over a century ago, to become a prosperous modern city of stark white high-rises dwarfing the white domes of mosques and the more intricate roofs of ancient Chinese and Indian temples.

Ruby found her way into the Chinatown district, found the Yasmin Restaurant on Jalan Sultan. It opened onto the street, a drab establishment, just a dozen laminated tables with a few wooden chairs. There was a Coca-Cola calendar on the back wall, with a picture of a glamorous blonde woman posing against a Lear jet; another, cheaper calendar featured a Chinese girl in a cheongsam in a ridiculous cloying pose. Dusty bottles of soft drink were ranged along narrow wooden shelves above a metal refrigerator. A dirt-encrusted fan turned slowly high on the ceiling.

A sign to the left of the door said: Travel Agent. There were torn and ancient posters of Hong Kong, Singapore and Bombay, and hand-written signs had been tacked to the dirty green walls to advertise local tours. There was a single wooden desk with a metal sign: Green Crescent Tours.

The desk was unattended.

The night-time traffic passed a few feet from the tables, horns blaring, the tinny motors of the Honda motorcycles over-revving. The air was heavy with the stink of petrol.

Just a handful of customers, mostly taxi drivers or young men looking for work as tour guides. They stared at Ruby as she sat down; she knew how she must look, in the torn *patung*

and blouse, scratches over her forearms and shins and face. She was acutely aware of her own smell.

The waiter, a boy barely out of his teens, picked up a notepad and a dirty laminated menu, and slouched over. His shirt, stained with dried sweat, was open to the third button. An unescorted woman, he thought, possibly a prostitute. He threw the menu on the table and waited.

Ruby ordered a pot of tea and some satay, knowing she had no money to pay. When the waiter returned with the tea, Ruby had her left hand resting on the table, the forefinger and little finger bent, and the thumb extended. The boy saw it, and his eyes widened a fraction in surprise. Ruby relaxed, just a little. She had given the boy the hand signal that identified herself as a veteran 432 Grass Sandal – the rank of liaison officer in her triad – and he had recognised it.

She poured herself some of the tea, and placed the cup facing the spout. He studied her with renewed respect. Without a word he turned and went into the kitchen.

A moment later he reappeared with another, older Chinese. The boy nodded in her direction. The man walked over and stood beside her table.

'Your face is pale,' he said in Cantonese.

'My heart is red.'

'Do you not owe me some money?'

'I paid you, I recall.'

'Where?'

'In the market.' It was a reference to the Tai Ping Market, a place famous in triad legend.

He nodded, apparently satisfied. He sat down, picked up the tea she had poured into her cup and drank it. It was a signal that the help she had obliquely requested would be forthcoming. 'Who are you?' he said.

'Never mind my name. Give me your pen.'

The man took the biro from his shirt pocket and gave it to her. She took a paper napkin from the table and scribbled a Hong Kong phone number and underneath she wrote: LITTLE FLOWER.

'This number is in Hong Kong. You ask for fifty thousand Hong Kong, urgent. This is the password.'

He looked at his watch. 'Too late now. You come back tomorrow, nine o'clock, okay?' He looked at the scratches on her arms and face, and the dirt on her blouse. 'You are in danger?'

Ruby thought carefully before answering. 'Have run from danger. Now I have no money.'

The man considered, then reached into his shirt pocket and produced a small bundle of notes. He counted off five hundred Malaysian dollars and handed them to her. She stuffed them gratefully into the pocket of her blouse.

'How long you been in Malaysia, okay?'

'Crossed the border last night.'

His attention again returned to the cuts on her arms and he seemed to understand. 'There is a hotel very close to here. The Ipoh Hotel off Jalan Petaling. Very clean, very cheap.' He gave her his business card. 'Tell them you are a friend. They will look after you.'

The food arrived. Ruby had not eaten for two days and the spicy smell of it, the steam rising from the plate, made her stomach juices growl. She picked up the aluminium spoon. It was all she could do not to claw the food into her gaping mouth with her fingers.

She nodded to indicate that she understood. He went back into the kitchen. Ruby finished eating and left. No one asked her for money, nor did she expect them too. The short-term loan and the bill for the food would be deducted from the money transfer, together with commission.

The Ipoh Hotel was run by the owner and his family, who all lived downstairs in a single room on the other side of the stairs. There were six rooms, each with a fan, a bed, and rickety wooden cupboard. The door to the balcony was locked to keep out thieves.

Ruby washed her clothes in the stained hand basin in the corner of the room, and then stood on the cold white tiles of the washroom down the corridor to sluice off the dirt in her hair and on her body.

As she ladled the cold water over her head she closed her eyes and calculated the next move. Where she could go

from here? She did not dare go back to Hong Kong. Perhaps England. She could stay with her elder sister.

Got to be careful, Ruby-ah. Cannot trust nobody, heya. Not even your own sworn brothers.

Afterwards she lay naked in the darkness, feeling the sweat crawl over her body, listening to the sing-song chatter of a Cantonese soap opera from a television in the apartment across the street. She scratched at the angry red lumps on her ankles. Bed bugs. She winced at the fiery pain in her lower belly and had to rush to the squat toilet in the next room. Four months in a Bangkok prison and now the food in a lousy Malaysian restaurant had given her diarrhoea.

She staggered back to the bed and flopped down on her belly. After Maha Chai the hotel's modest facilities seemed like a luxury. She had almost forgotten what it was like to have clean sheets and a clean bathroom with a proper toilet and a shower.

The last forty-eight hours had become a crowded jumble of images; thirsty, cramped and sweating on the crowded bus to Hatyai; spending the last of the money she had to bribe a local policeman to lead her through the jungle to an unguarded section of the border where she could scramble through the wire; hitching rides with trucks heading south from the border, fighting off two truck drivers who had tried to rape her. Finally getting a ride through to KL.

She had to get money. She had no passport, no identity papers of any kind. She had money in the Siam Commercial Bank but the accounts would have been frozen after her arrest. And she could not access her accounts in the Hong Kong & Shanghai without identity papers. She had kept an emergency fund always at a travel agency in Hollywood Road. It was the same agency Eddie Lau had used for transferring funds to and from overseas; they had an upstairs room with a scrambled telephone line for secret money transfers.

She wondered if Louis Huu was still looking for her. His tentacles reached inside Burma and China and Hong Kong, why not Malaysia and London? Would he consider that she was really worth so much effort once she was out of the way?

Worse if it was Eddie who wanted to kill her. Eddie would never give up. Surely Eddie would never harm his Ruby-ah?

Cannot be sure.

Hate this life, Ruby thought. Cannot live this way no more. Perhaps just one more big score, enough so I do not have to be poor. Just one big score, and I will get out.

This is no business for a good girl like Ruby Wen.

She was tired, tired to her bones, but the cramps in her belly kept her awake long into the night. Must have been the food that made her so sick.

Or perhaps it was fear.

69

When she came back to the restaurant at nine o'clock the next day the man who had spoken to her the previous evening was not there. A young boy sat behind the desk of Green Crescent Tours staring into the street. When she told him she was there to collect a transfer he shrugged his shoulders and nodded towards the kitchens. The surly young waiter she had met from the previous evening was on duty. He told her to wait and brought her tea.

She needed that money today. She waited.

Nine twenty. What could have gone wrong?

Just before nine-thirty a black Mercedes Benz pulled up outside. The driver parked it with its near-side wheels on the footpath, and got out. He was wearing a silk shirt, open at the neck, to reveal a hairless chest and a number of thick gold chains. His hair was slicked down with oil. Under the shirt his belly would have done justice to a heavily pregnant woman. By the time he had negotiated the steps up to the restaurant and arrived at her corner table, he was out of breath.

Ruby Wen realised she knew this man. It was Henry Pi.

The pall of lethargy that afflicted the staff of the little restaurant immediately evaporated as they hovered around him, trying to anticipate his wishes. He ignored them.

He flopped down in the chair opposite Ruby, his face betraying his surprise at her appearance. A waiter brought him a chilled bottle of Singha beer and poured it into a glass.

'Ruby,' Henry Pi said. He sipped his beer, and used his hand to wipe the froth from his wispy moustache. He pointed to the cup in front of her. 'Would you like something else besides tea?'

'You got any Hennessey VSOP?'

'There is not much call for it among the usual clientele in this establishment.'

'Stick with tea, okay.'

Henry Pi swallowed the rest of his beer and the young waiter was immediately at his side to refill the glass. A boy went to fetch another bottle of beer.

'What a pleasant surprise.'

Ruby did not answer him. Got really bad joss, she thought. Gods must be very angry with me, heya. Henry Pi must own this business. Last night the manager will have rung him as soon as she had left. Told him about this Hong Kong Chinese who showed up asking for a money transfer, all beat up and bleeding.

'I know what you are thinking, Ruby,' he said. 'But I must tell you that there is very little that happens in Kuala Lumpur that I don't know about.'

'A girl got to be impressed.'

'Thank you. So. What are you doing in Kuala Lumpur?'

Ruby hesitated. She was painfully conscious of how desperate she must look. The cuts on her face and arms stamped her as a fugitive. 'Got a little trouble, okay?'

'In Malaysia?'

Ruby shook her head, evasive.

'In Thailand then.' Henry Pi digested this information. 'How long have you been in Malaysia, Ruby?'

'Crossed the border two nights ago.'

'Through the wire, by the looks of it,' Henry Pi said, and his smile let her know that he understood her situation perfectly. He traced the contours of a long deep scratch on her forearm, his pudgy finger lingering on her flesh. 'You should have this treated by a doctor or it will fester.'

'Hong Kong got good doctors. Many.'

'Indeed.' He drank his beer and considered. 'Is that where you want to go, Ruby? Hong Kong?' He leaned back in his chair and regarded her. 'You look very different from the last time we met. You were very assured then, very elegant. You were wearing a black dress, if my memory serves me correctly. Very short and very expensive.'

'Today I like to dress casual,' Ruby said.

'I am just casual too,' Henry Pi said. He showed her his watch. 'Girard Perigaux. I have three Rolexes for dress occasions.' He leaned back and waved a hand expansively around him. 'What do you think?'

A dump, heya! Ruby thought. 'Make much money from this business?'

'Of course not. It is just a front for my other interests, as I am sure you know.' He studied her with insolent frankness. 'You look desperate.'

'Temporary set-back, okay.'

'Here you are, in these peasant's clothes, without money. What strikes me as curious is that you have not contacted your associates, wherever they are. Surely the Thai police have not been so thorough as to apprehend them all? That would be most uncharacteristic. So I am thinking to myself: perhaps it is not the police this woman is running from, but her own friends, such as they are.' He smiled, delighted with his own sagacity. 'We contacted this number you gave us. But someone in Hong Kong appears to have anticipated your call. They were indeed very anxious to find you. In fact they are on their way to Kuala Lumpur now.'

Ruby stood up. Henry caught her wrist.

'Sit down, Ruby. Where is there to run to?'

He was right. She sat down. Maybe better to bluff this out.

Henry leaned forward. She could see the little beads of sweat on his forehead. 'What did you do that was so bad that you had to run away, Ruby?'

'Join the DEA in Bangkok,' she said.

Henry Pi finished his beer and the waiter scurried off to get another. 'It's a pity we could not be friends, Ruby. I do like a girl with a sense of humour.'

70

The Cathay Tri-Star lifted clear of the tarmac and began its steep ascent into a lowering and overcast sky. In the first class compartment Ruby closed her eyes, imagined the nightmare of the last four months slipping away beneath her. Musak on the cabin's sound system to calm the nerves. The jarring bumps of turbulence. Eddie beside her, his face a mask.

He had said little since he had collected her the previous evening from Henry Pi's palatial bungalow on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, where she had been entertained as his house guest and prisoner. No clue to what he was thinking, what he intended to do with her. But he had brought her new clothes, and a new passport; a forgery, of course, but a professional job, A-0197758, issued in Kuala Lumpur, with visas for Hong Kong and Singapore on the first two pages. She would enter Hong Kong as Kam Li-feng.

Would he go to so much trouble if he knew she had talked to the DEA?

The Tri-Star reached its cruising altitude and a hostess brought them champagne. Strange life I have, Ruby thought. Two nights ago I was sharing a hard cotton bed with millions of bedlice; now I am drinking *pinot noir* in the first class compartment of a jetliner. She turned to Eddie and touched his glass with her own. 'Freedom,' she said.

Eddie shook his head. 'Ruby–ah, you make a lot of trouble this time. Even for you.'

'Why did you never come and see me? Four months I was in that cess hole. You never come once.'

He ignored the accusation. 'You know how much it cost me to get you out?' When she did not answer, he said: 'What happened in Bangkok? Why did you run away?'

Perhaps he did not know, after all. Perhaps all this time he

really was trying to get her out of Maha Chai! She must have been crazy to talk to the American! 'Cannot trust that Louis Huu. He is the maggot-eaten penis of a dead dog.'

'Louis Huu said you ran away from him. Thinks maybe you have been talking to the police. You talking to the police, Ruby–ah?'

He still has not decided what to do with me, she realised. What I tell him next will make up his mind. If I deny everything he will know I am lying. Remember the best lies are hidden in the truth.

'Sure I talk to the *king chat*. Girl has to look out for herself, okay. Don't want to wait till I am old and wrinkled for Eddie–ah to get me out of that stinking place.'

'What did you tell them?' he hissed.

'Tell them everything I know about Louis Huu. That is why I ran away.'

'And what did you tell them about me?'

She looked up at him. His eyes were black. Like staring into the ocean at night. 'Sure, I tell them everything about you, Eddie. Betray the only man I ever love in the whole world.'

He looked away first.

'Can never hurt you, Eddie–ah,' she whispered. 'I ever hurt you, I stick a knife here through my own heart.'

A muscle twitched in his jaw. 'Louis Huu will kill you when he finds out.'

'What choice do I have? Think I am going to rot in that stinking place for ever?'

'Should have trusted me.'

'Do trust you, okay. But you are in China and I am two thousand kilometres away.'

'You know how much I have to pay for you, Ruby–ah? Thirty-one million baht. That is a lot of tea money.'

Despite herself Ruby was impressed. Must be crazy, heya! Thirty-one million!

'Have to pay Louis Huu the money I owe for his number four. Another three million for squeeze. All for you, Ruby–ah.'

She leaned across, and slowly and deliberately circled his ear with her tongue. A scarlet fingernail traced the contour of his inner thigh to his crotch. She saw the hostess watching

her. She didn't care. 'Love you too much, Eddie–ah. Love you so much, think I will die.'

'From now on, got to trust me, Ruby–ah,' he whispered.

So he believes me, she thought. Stupid to be so afraid. Just have to keep your nerve, Ruby–ah! Never can lose. This time you think you lose, but now you win again. Can make this man do anything. Thinks he is so hard, so clever, but he is stupid like everyone. You are really so clever, Ruby.

No shit.

71

San Francisco

Ruby Wen met John Bertolli in the coffee shop of the Hyatt on Union Square. Their meeting lasted for a quarter of an hour and at the conclusion Bertolli handed her a set of keys.

Ruby crossed the lobby to the elevators and rode down to the basement car park. She opened the boot of a black Mercedes saloon and took out a Samsonite briefcase. She opened it, examined the contents briefly and walked back to the elevators.

She then took a cab from outside the Hyatt to a nondescript six-storey building on Kearny Street, near the Embarcadero, not far from the tourist chaos of Fisherman's Wharf. There was a sign outside the building in English: White Dragon Savings and Loan. Another sign, in Chinese characters, ran vertically up the walls. Current interest rates were posted in the window.

The small public banking area on the ground floor was filled with Chinese. Ruby pushed past them to a stairway with a sign saying PRIVATE. She went up the stairs, unchallenged.

There was another set of offices on the second floor. A young Chinese clerk in a white shirt and black tie was working behind a plain wooden desk. Ruby walked in, sat down, and opened the suitcase. She took out bundles of twenty-dollar notes, wrapped in elastic bands, and deposited them on the desk. The clerk began to count them.

When he was finished, Ruby gave him a card, which read: AMERICAN SISTER PAY CHINESE BROTHER USD 400,000. TEL 20388.

The clerk gave her a chit, which Ruby put in her shoulder bag, and then she got up and left. Nothing had been written

down or recorded anywhere to show that the transaction had taken place.

The clerk translated the transaction into Chinese Commercial Code, which was then transmitted that night on a scrambled telephone line to the All Asia Friendship Company on Jiabin Lu in Shenzhen. A clerk in the office phoned the number on the transmission and an hour later Vincent Tse appeared at the offices, which were on the top floor of a rather dilapidated department store in the centre of the city. He was given a large suitcase containing over three million dollars in Hong Kong currency.

Arsenal Street headquarters, Wanchai

After calling from the phone outside the elevator bank on the tenth floor, Keelan was ushered through the security door and into McReadie's office. It was a crowded room, with two telephones on the desk, a computer terminal on the return, files and manuals on a narrow bookshelf, and a tiny window with a glimpse of the harbourfront. An entire wall was taken up with dozens of passport-sized photographs of undercover operatives pasted onto a whiteboard in the form of a link analysis.

McReadie was arranging a false passport and thirty thousand dollars flash money for one of his operations. It required two phone calls. When it was done he hung up and grinned at Keelan. 'Good job I'm an honest man.'

Keelan thought about what Ruby had told him in Bangkok. He had so far kept that piece of information – or disinformation – to himself. Cops were too easy a target. He would sit on that one for a while longer.

'How they hanging, Mac?'

'Want a coffee?'

Keelan shook his head. 'Had enough for one day. Heartbeat's already up to one-forty. What can I do for you?'

'Actually, I've got something for you.' He leaned both elbows on the desk. 'Remember Ruby Wen?'

Keelan feigned confusion. 'Have you got the triple-C code?'

'She's back in town.'

Keelan felt the hairs prickle on the back of his neck. That bitch. She had caused a flurry of real excitement in the Bangkok office for a couple of days. Then a judge had released her on bail and the Thai prosecutor's office had then decided to drop the case for lack of evidence.

'We've had her apartment under surveillance ever since you advised us she was no longer resident in Thailand,' McReadie went on. 'This morning at eight-fifteen we hit paydirt. She was seen getting out of a taxi in Conduit Road. Looks like she's back in the game.'

McReadie passed a black-and-white enlargement across the desk. The quality was poor, the subject of the photograph was wearing dark glasses, her face half turned away from the camera as she crossed the street. But there was no doubt. It was Ruby Wen.

'Nearly a month. I wonder where she's been.'

'She would have been moving around on a false passport. But this morning she came through Immigration on her own passport. It was on the Watch List.'

'What's the next move, Dave?'

'We watch, we listen, we wait.'

'She made me look like a goose.'

McReadie shook his head. 'She couldn't lie straight in bed.

Don't worry about it. Every dog has its day.'

'This dog is going to take a lump out of her butt.'

'And a very nice butt it is too. Wait your moment.'

Keelan shrugged. Can I trust you, Mac? Or was that just another one of Ruby Wen's fictions? 'Keep me informed.'

McReadie looked at his watch. 'Look at that. Day is nearly done. I'll come down with you.' McReadie put on his jacket and they walked down the corridor to the lifts. 'What are you doing tonight?' McReadie asked him as they stepped into the elevator.

'Quiet night.'

'Back to that old sackcloth and ashes?'

'Something like that.'

'It's Lace's birthday. A few of us are celebrating at Delaney's. Interested?'

Keelan hesitated. 'I don't think so.'

'The lassie's still carrying a torch for you, John. God knows why.' When Keelan didn't answer, McReadie said: 'Have you made up your mind yet about the priesthood?'

'The priesthood?'

'Might as well, the way you're living.'

The elevator doors opened. They stood in the foyer. 'You have to give these things time.'

'Life goes on, John. You can't cry for ever.'

Keelan shrugged. 'I'll see how I feel later. Maybe I'll join you.'

McReadie's face darkened. When he spoke again his voice was low and angry. 'You weren't drunk and driving a car. You didn't fall asleep smoking a cigarette and incinerate the house. It's not your fault. You were just doing your job, for fucking Christ's sake! Stop whipping yourself over it.'

Keelan shrugged. 'I may have to work late on a few things.'

'We'll be there till morning.'

Keelan walked away, past security and into the boiling heat of the car park. He knew McReadie was right. But he felt as if he was breaking in two; a part of him loyal to his memories, despising the other part of him that was reaching out again for another woman. You're a selfish bastard, John, he told himself, although he knew such thoughts were irrational. For eighteen months he had walked the midway, balanced between mourning and longing,. and he still did not know which way he would fall.

It was a Friday night and Delaney's was starting to fill. A small group of detectives were gathered around the bar; Lacey, McReadie, Tyler, a couple of others he didn't recognise.

McReadie saw him and shouted a welcome. He bought a Carlsberg and handed it to him. 'Decided you didn't have a vocation after all?'

'I never said I'd given up drinking.'

Keelan looked over at Lacey. She was learning against the bar, surrounded by Tyler and the other two detectives. She saw him and waved a hello, then returned to her conversation with her colleagues. Keelan felt a knot forming in his stomach and wished he had not come.

Her hair had been cut shorter, perhaps only recently, Keelan decided, by the way she continually finger-brushed an imaginary comma of hair back from her forehead, as if it was still falling across her face. But otherwise she looked the same and he felt a guilty stirring. He saw her occasionally, mostly at the Press Club on Lockhart Street, and they smiled at each other but did not speak. McReadie told him she had been seeing a young barrister, one of Mac's neighbours from Stanley.

Keelan wondered when his own period of mourning would be over. He supposed it might end the day he forgave himself for what had happened. He still did not know when that would be.

'Can't stay long,' he said to McReadie.

'Me neither,' McReadie said. 'Told the wife I'd be home by four a.m.'

72

Keelan finished the Carlsberg and ordered another for McReadie. 'What about you?' McReadie said.

'I'd better be going,' Keelan said.

'Already?' a voice said at his side. He looked around. It was Lacey.

Keelan shrugged. 'Just stopped by to wish you happy birthday.' He reached into his jacket pocket. 'Nearly forgot.' He produced a small gift-wrapped box.

Lacey looked surprised. 'Thank you.'

'It's nothing. Couple of month's salary, that's all.'

She opened it. It was a small jade elephant.

'For your collection. Everyone needs as much good luck as they can get.'

'It's beautiful. Thank you.'

There was a beat as they studied each other. 'How have you been?' Keelan said, finally.

'Fine.'

'You look great.' Another beat. 'You've cut your hair.'

She ran her hand through it again, self-consciously. 'Do you like it? Doesn't make me look like a riot policeman?'

'If you had a steel helmet and a shield you'd still look great.'

'I think that says more about your sexual preferences than my hair style.'

McReadie grinned. 'Must have a chat with one of your colleagues, Lace,' he said, and left the two of them alone at the bar.

Lacey put the gift in her shoulder bag and passed him her empty glass. 'Brandy and soda. Or does a girl have to buy her own drinks on her birthday?'

'Sure,' Keelan said, and took out a hundred-dollar note and tried to attract the barman's attention.

'You know, I never figured you out,' Lacey said.

He looked down at her. Her eyes were shining, just a little too brightly. He realised she had been celebrating harder than he had imagined. 'There's not much to figure.'

'You really hurt me, Keelan.'

'I didn't mean to.'

'What sort of a fucking answer is that?' she hissed. Must be drunk, he thought. She would never swear when she was sober. The barman returned with another Carlsberg and the brandy and soda. He handed it to her while he rehearsed his lines. 'Look, I'm sorry. A guy's meant to perform, right. I couldn't perform.'

'Perform,' she said, her voice flat. 'You make it sound like a rock concert.'

'Well certainly not hard rock, anyway.'

'It's not funny, Keelan. I wasn't angry about that night. I can understand stage fright. What I hurt was when you dropped me afterwards. Like it was my fault.'

'I never thought it was your fault.'

'I made a fool of myself over you.'

'How can you think that? No one knew. Only me and you. If anyone looked foolish, I did. If I hurt you, I'm really sorry. I just thought it was . . . for the best.'

'I don't make a habit of one night stands, for your information. What were you thinking of? Oh, shit, she wasn't any good, let's try somewhere else.'

'I didn't realise this still bugged you.'

'In a minute I'm going to kick you in the balls. I'm trained to do that, you know.'

'What can I say?'

'Is this some sort of ego trip? I admit it, Keelan, I fell for your off-hand charm. Now you have thirty seconds to say something halfway decent or sensible. I feel a nerve twitching in my knee.'

'I lied to you.'

'Here it comes.'

'Anna and Caroline . . . my wife and my daughter . . .'

'They're still alive?'

He shook his head. 'Mac never told you?'

'Said it wasn't his business.'

Keelan took a deep breath. Only McReadie knew. He hated telling this story. It always sounded as if he was looking for sympathy. Anyway, people never knew how to react, what to say. 'Someone put a contract out. On me. The guy came to my house. Only he didn't just whack me.'

Lacey watched him struggle with it. He fumbled for his cigarettes in his pocket, remembered, then slammed them down on the counter.

Lacey leaned forward, took one out of the packet, lighted it, and handed it to him.

'Thanks.'

'How old was your daughter?'

'Eleven months. Eleven months. Imagine. Killing a baby with a handgun. What sort of man can do something like that?' He drew deeply on the cigarette, and grimaced. 'Didn't smoke before. Maybe it's a subconscious wish to finish the job.' He angrily ground it out with his heel. 'I've been through it in my head a thousand times. I can't get past that. I can't get accept it or understand it. You'd think . . . you'd think a cop would understand, wouldn't you?' He stopped, gave himself time. 'I can't do it, Madeleine. I can't get through this. It's been two years, and the tunnel's still just as long and just as black. I don't think there is any light at the end. It just keeps going, and it's getting darker and darker.'

She reached out for him, brushed his cheek with the back of his hand.

'That night with you, I felt like I was cheating on her. That's why I didn't want to see you any more. Happiness, love, that's for other people now.'

Lacey almost said, 'But that's done, that's over,' but stopped herself. How could she know how he felt, or what was done?

'I don't know how to make anyone understand,' Keelan said. 'No one can understand, I guess. Not really. The pain's so bad you don't feel it all at once. You let it drip in, a bit at a time, day after day. There just seems to be a well of it, and it keeps filling up every time you think you've drained it dry. You wake up in the morning and everything's okay and then

you sit up and suddenly you remember again. You remember and the pain starts up. So you put all your photographs away and try not to look at them. You move house. You move countries. You try not to think. Just anything to get away from the fucking anger, from this terrible fucking pain in your chest.' His voice was different, hoarse with emotions that would not die. 'I just want to hold them again, Lace. I want to feel my wife's warm body next to me in the bed, smell my little daughter's hair after her bath. I can't get past this. I'm still alive, but the guy who did this, he didn't really miss. He drilled me damned good. I'm not living, I'm just treading water. Christ, there's just nothing I can do any more.'

He finished his beer and stared over the heads of the crowd, his eyes blank and dead. Lacey touched his hand, squeezed his fingers. He did not respond.

'It's a nightmare,' he whispered. 'I just keep wanting to wake up.'

'I'm sorry. I'm really sorry.'

'Hey, don't be. It's your birthday and I just dropped a bucket of shit on your head. Can't keep my stupid mouth shut, that's my problem.'

'John . . .'

'I'd better get going. Real life and soul of the party.'

'John, don't.' He tried to pull away from her but she held his wrist. 'Don't go.'

'I'm not really a party animal any more, Lace. But any time you want to feel really depressed, give me a call.'

'How are you getting home?'

'Cab, I guess.'

Lacey seemed to make a decision. She turned around. Tyler and the other detectives were watching her. Tomorrow this would be all round the office. 'Don't be alone tonight,' she whispered.

'Madeleine, I don't think that's a good idea.'

'You don't have to do anything. You don't have to – perform. I can just be a friend, if that's what you want. We can talk, or we can just sit on the balcony and look at the ocean. I don't care. But don't be on your own tonight.'

He shook his head. 'Why?'

Good question, she thought. Because I'm drawn to you. Like a moth to a flame. The analogy is not a promising one. 'Just because,' she said.

'Okay,' he whispered. He could see the other detectives watching. 'But it's going to ruin your street cred.'

'I can take it,' she said.

They left together and found a taxi on Lockhart Road.

When they got to the apartment Charlotte was already in bed. She appeared in the doorway of her bedroom in a pink chenille dressing gown. Lacey froze her with a look. 'Thank you, Charlotte. That will be all,' she said.

The bedroom door closed.

Keelan whistled softly under his breath. 'Very impressive.'

'Dutch courage,' Lacey whispered. She only tripped once on the way across the living room. 'I'll get us a drink.'

Keelan went out onto the balcony. The lights of Pokfulam disappeared into the blackness of the ocean. Out in the night the lights of the Aberdeen fishing fleet winked like fireflies.

Lacey brought two San Migs from the refrigerator and handed one to Keelan. 'Mud in your eye.'

'What was that again?'

'Just an expression.' She leaned back against the rail, illuminated by the soft yellow light spilling from the living room. Her jacket was open and he followed the contours of her body beneath her pink blouse and grey skirt. 'What's wrong? Have I put on weight?'

'I was thinking what a beautiful woman you are.'

'Don't start something you can't finish,' Lacey said, and immediately could have bitten her tongue. 'Sorry, I didn't mean that . . . like that.'

But Keelan only laughed. 'Hey, you're right. Just came here to talk, right?'

'I told you, John, you don't have to talk, you don't have to do anything. I just couldn't stand the thought of you going back to your apartment on your own . . . in the mood you were in. I was sad for you.'

'I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me, for Christ's sake.'

'I didn't say sorry, I said sad. I can't start to understand how you feel . . . I just . . . I wanted to get out of there anyway, Tyler was treating me like his virginal daughter and the other two were leering at me like I was a bar girl. They're fine with me at work, but being a single and unattached female without a dead body to stand over can be unbelievably traditional.'

'I don't want to sound ungrateful. I was pretty glad you rescued me as well. I didn't want to be on my own tonight either. It's Anna's birthday.'

'Ah.'

'Coincidence.'

'I feel like humming the theme from the Twilight Zone. Christ. How macabre.'

Keelan rubbed his hand over his face. 'I feel like the Grim Reaper. You sure you want me to stay?'

'Do you want to talk, John? Have you ever talked this through with anyone?'

'The hospital arranged for me to see this trauma counsellor. But I don't know. This isn't something you get over, I guess.'

'Do you want to talk now?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know where to start.'

'Why don't you start with Anna?'

'Anna? Anna was a lot like you.'

'This really is the Twilight Zone.'

'She didn't look like you. She was blonde, and not as tall. But she was like you in a lot of other ways. She was what you might call ballsy and she had a smart mouth.'

'Am I supposed to be flattered here?'

He gave a wry smile. 'You'd rather I liked mousy, dumb women?'

'You have my permission to continue. But I'm not allowing you any more latitude. Isn't that what your judges say?'

'Only on television.'

Lacey crossed her arms. 'So tell me about her. Where did you meet?'

'It was a football game at Candlestick Park. She was with her boyfriend, I was sitting right behind. He got up at half-time

to get some popcorn. By the time he came back I had her name and phone number, everything.'

'How did you manage that?'

'I noticed they were pretty cool with each other. I figured they weren't in love or anything like that. Plus being a cop I figured if he tried to punch me I could arrest him and really impress her.'

'What did you say to her?'

'I asked her who was winning. She said: "Have you been asleep or something?" I said: "No, I was looking at you. I think you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen in my life and I couldn't concentrate on anything else."'

Lacey raised her eyebrows. 'What did she do?'

'What would you have done?'

'I would have written you off as a con artist.'

'Well, I guess she wasn't as smart as you, after all. She believed me. Which was good, because I was telling the truth.' He finished his beer and balanced the empty bottle on the rail. 'I know it sounds corny but I never ever looked at another woman from that day on. I never was one of those guys who played around. Sometimes I figure there must be something wrong with me. I guess a monogamous heterosexual is just about the weirdest thing you can be in the nineties, right?'

'Right.'

She picked up the empty bottle and went in to fetch two more San Migs.

It was getting late and the wind that came off the ocean was cool, and Lacey shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. Keelan was staring into the darkness, taking his time, as she had asked him to.

'It was what they call a Title III investigation. I had been working undercover for over two years, but we couldn't get these people to deal with us. They were too careful. But finally we had enough to go to a judge and get the authority to make a phone tap. After two months we had two hundred hours of this guy talking into his phone. I mean, this guy had a lot of mileage on his mouth. And so we took him down.

'Trouble was, his father was what you might call an identity

around Little Italy. He was mafiosi, one of the city's big bosses. I started getting phone calls, I was asked to lose certain items of evidence in return for some sum of money. A lot of money. Okay, I refused. I guess at this stage I should have started to get concerned. But I was an arrogant son of a bitch, and I thought, well, if they come for me, it will be on the street. I can handle that. Instead they sent this guy to my home. My *home*.

'I spent the next three months in hospital, lost twenty kilos. As soon as I got out of hospital I sold the house, I never set foot inside it again. My new place I had armed police outside twenty-four hours a day.

'They didn't need to bother. They'd got what they wanted. The trial was suspended, as I was the DA's principal witness, and proceedings were held over until I was well enough to appear in court. By that time I discovered that someone else had taken the bait. The originals of the phone taps had been destroyed and all that was left were cassette copies. Their lawyer had the judge rule the tapes inadmissible, saying they breached his client's rights under the Fourth Amendment. And the guy just walked free. He was a drug dealer, his father was a mafiosi boss, and he just snubbed his nose at us and walked right out of the court.

'And you know what his father said to me as he walked out of the court room? "No hard feelings". Like I had maliciously brought all this bad fortune on his family. "No hard feelings." I should have shot the motherfucker right there and then.'

'What was his name?' Lacey asked.

'Bertolli. His name was John Bertolli.'

73

The sun glittered on the ex-pat swimming pools on the hill below, on the South China Sea and the distant humps of the islands, on the misted peaks of Lantau. Lacey sat on the balcony with a cup of instant coffee and reviewed her hangover and her memories of the previous evening with a secret glow of pleasure. So much for Icey Lacey. So much for The Perfumed Dragon.

Charlotte was making a lot of noise in the kitchen. Lacey had the *South China Morning Post* open on her lap and ignored her. Finally Charlotte came out onto the balcony.

'What would Missus Lacey like for breakfast?'

'Missus Lacey has had her breakfast, thank you Charlotte. A cup of black coffee and an aspirin has been adequate to my needs this morning.'

'Whole apartment smelly with smoke.'

'He didn't smoke last night.'

'Makes no difference,' Charlotte said. 'You don't go to work today?'

'It's my rostered day off.'

She returned her attention to the newspaper. Charlotte stood her ground. 'Where is the *yanqui*?'

'My rostered day off, not his.'

'He stayed here all night.'

'Yes,' Lacey said. 'All night.' She almost added: 'He slept on the couch,' but she did not intend to give Charlotte the satisfaction. Nothing else had happened. Keelan had been too sad, and she had been too drunk. No one would believe her, of course, but she didn't give a damn. Charlotte would pout and Lacey's colleagues would gossip like *tai-tais* at the fish market. Let them.

'I can smell cigarettes,' Charlotte said.

Lacey put down the paper. 'Charlotte. Do I ask what you do with your time?'

Charlotte's face was sullen. 'No, Missus Lacey.'

'I am a grown woman, with an independent income, and I am not married. What I do in my own time is my own affair. You are not my mother. Let us understand each other on that. I am also your employer. If my standards do not meet with your approval, you are free to leave at any time. But please don't nag me.'

'Not good for you, that one.'

'Thank you, Charlotte.'

'I will pray for you.'

Charlotte closed the balcony door, protecting the air-conditioned interior. Lacey smiled. Yesterday she had turned twenty-seven. And she still had people disapproving of the company she kept. She knew she should be angry, but it made her feel like a teenager again.

Icey Lacey . . .

Shenzhen

Vincent got out of bed, put on a burgundy-silk dressing gown and went into the living room. He went to the bar, picked up a bottle of Hennessey VSOP and poured three fingers into two brandy balloons. He brought them back to the bedroom.

Eddie was standing in front of the mirror, naked, shadow boxing.

'Love me, baby?' Vincent said, in English. There is no word in Cantonese for 'love'.

'Sure,' Eddie said. He had his hands held in front of his face, not in the classical stance of *gong fu*, but in the *jeet kune do* stance made famous by Bruce Lee. He led with a straight right punch, parried his own blow in the mirror, the rest a blur of movement as he stepped back out of range, moved in with another attack, parried again. Vincent watched him, his face hungry as he watched the bands of muscle on Eddie's back and buttocks ripple as he moved, the tattoos of serpents and dragons woken to snarling, writhing life on his skin.

'Better than anyone? Better than Ruby Wen?'

'Sure, better than Ruby-ah. How can you ask me that?'

'You lie so good,' Vincent said.

He remembered what the Sun Yee On boys had called him when they beat him that one time: *The Tiger's Peach*. Eddie was the tiger, the one they feared. It didn't matter that Vincent was the brains, Eddie's Paper Fan, the planner, the organiser, the one that had made their syndicate so feared and respected. But Vincent did not have face with the other triads. He was just a cut sleeve, a biter of pillows.

'Have to talk to you,' he said. 'About this Ruby Wen.'

Eddie's expression changed. Vincent watched him in the mirror. The look of intense concentration disappeared. His muscles relaxed and his hands dropped to his sides. 'Don't want to talk about Ruby now.'

'Must talk about her.'

Eddie looked sulky and said nothing.

'Ruby Wen is stealing our money, Eddie.'

Eddie offered no comment.

'Last cash she send from the Golden Mountain is nearly three hundred and twenty short.'

'Some mistake, maybe.'

'Mistake at baccarat maybe. She is losing, Eddie. Big time losing.'

Eddie looked like a child who had been told something he didn't want to hear. He turned away from the mirror. In the corner were two large buckets filled with almonds. He knelt down, curled his fingers and stabbed down hard into the buckets in turn. It was an exercise he did often, to make his fingers strong and his hands hard. He could jab them into solid bone in a fight, he said, and they would not bend. He called it knife hands.

Vincent came to stand at the window. The apartment looked over the burgeoning high-rises of the new city, and across the border towards the New Territories of Hong Kong.

'I will talk to her,' Eddie said.

'She is cheating you, Eddie-ah.'

'Don't want to hear no more.'

'Has no respect for you! She takes away your face!'

'Don't want to hear no more!' He stabbed his fingers so viciously into the almonds that Vincent heard a sharp crack. Perhaps one of the shells, perhaps a bone in one of the knife hands.

You fool, Vincent thought. She steals all our money and takes away our face and everyone will know we are weak. Now I hear she has another gambling debt with the Sun Yee On money lenders. If she was not Ruby Wen she would have died by a thousand knives by now.

Eddie got up and started to dress.

'Got to wash her Eddie! Got to chop her down!'

The bedroom door slammed.

Crazy for her, Vincent thought. Says he loves me but all the time he is crazy for her and there is nothing I can do.

74

The main ferry terminal from Hong Kong to Macao has the appearance of a modern airport. The twin-towered complex at Sheung Wan contains a hotel, a shopping centre and the harbour's control tower, and inside the terminal there are overhead television screens displaying boarding times and departure gates. The Boeing jetfoils make the trip to Macao in less than fifty minutes, skimming across the water at sixty miles per hour.

Even the interiors of the beetle-like ferries resemble aircraft cabins, with hostesses moving between the aisles with refreshments. As soon as the crafts leave Hong Kong waters the same hostesses pass along the cabins selling instant lottery tickets for the truly addicted who cannot wait to throw their money at Macao.

Ruby bought ten lottery tickets and won five hundred dollars. It was a good omen. She was sure now that her luck had changed.

Macao was a sad and mean waterfront town, it seemed to Ruby, perhaps what Hong Kong looked like thirty years ago; a backwater of cramped, ancient streets, a piece of the Algarve dumped on the edge of an Asian swamp.

Most of the triad initiation rites were performed here. The Portuguese police were just about asleep.

To Ruby, the only good thing about Macao were the casinos.

It was a five-minute taxi ride along the Avenue Amizade to the Lisboa casino, a truly disgusting building with a roof shaped like the limbs of a roulette wheel. In the daylight, it looked tawdry, an Arabian turban draped with light bulbs.

The foyer was a mean affair, cordoned off with a screen to

assist the security checks. A windowless cloister, lit up like a cheap English seafront amusement arcade even in the middle of the day, surrounded the central gaming hall where amahs in black pyjamas and plastic sandals gambled their wages on fan tan, playing percentages at a meagre three to one on, while old men in pullovers and jackets and frayed shirts played blackjack and *pai gow*, pushing their chips around an electronically illuminated board. Losers turned away and hawked onto the carpet.

No one smiled, no one stopped to talk. This was not play, this was not a game. This was a hall full of people alone and battling the same terrible demon.

Luck.

She took the escalators to the second floor, to the high stakes baccarat rooms. At this time of the morning only one game was in progress in the Treasure Island Room, nine or ten aficionados playing noisily and enthusiastically. Ruby felt herself breathing faster, as if she had been running. There was a familiar tightening in her belly and quickening of her pulse. Better than sex, better than anything, she thought. Today she was going to be a big winner, she could feel it.

Tonight I can catch the ferry back to Hong Kong and I will not have to worry about money problems any more. I just need some good luck.

A little joss.

75

Ruby wandered dazed along the empty arcades, her senses assaulted by the stale smell of body odour and tobacco smoke, the jangling of the slot machines, the electric pall of the strip lights. She wandered through the shopping arcade, stunned and disbelieving. Two cleaners in chocolate-brown uniforms were staring at her, thinking she was drunk, but she was unaware of them.

She had just lost another three hundred thousand dollars. She looked at her watch. One o'clock. She had started playing at around ten that morning. Just three hours . . .

Eventually she found herself standing in the foyer of the hotel, next to two glass cases containing huge antique vases. Unlike other hotel foyers it was quiet, almost deserted. The hub of this particular hotel was the casino.

She suddenly felt faint. She looked around for somewhere to sit, but there were no banquettes, no coffee shop.

A taxi pulled into the forecourt. A tall, dark-haired young man, expensively dressed in a suit of raw silk and a tailored burgundy shirt, strode into the lobby. He stopped, halfway across the lobby, and stared at her.

'Ruby,' he said.

For a moment she felt as if he had found her naked. She grinned back, reaching for her character as easily as reaching for a towel. She affected her Suzie Wong voice. 'Hello Joe. Buy me lady's drink?'

The gentle click of crystal and silverware in the A Galera was a soothing relief from the noise of the casino downstairs. Lucien ordered them chilli crab, African chicken and a bottle of Madeira.

'So,' he said. 'You.'

Lucien felt a tightness in his chest. Ruby. Skinny, stylish Ruby in a Christian Lacroix brown leather jacket with a felt collar and gold-embossed sleeves. Short brown felt shorts, black leather boots with chains, jet hair moussed and swept back. Outrageous. Exotic. Back from the damned.

'How do you do it, Ruby? Last time I saw you, you were in that stinking prison in Bangkok. Who fixes this for you? Louis Huu?'

'Maybe.'

'I heard you were released. I tried to find out what had happened to you.'

Ruby gulped down her wine and tapped the glass with a scarlet fingernail to indicate she wanted more. There was perspiration on her top lip, and her movements were quick and nervous. Like the pet finches the old Chinese men were so fond of. So she is still trapped, Lucien decided. But by what?

'So what you doing in Hong Kong, okay?' she asked him.

'Business.'

Ruby nodded. 'Nice clotheses, new watch. Doing okay, no shit. Working for your father now, I bet.'

A shrug.

'How long you in Hong Kong, okay?'

'A few days. Then I go to the States.'

Ruby raised an eyebrow. 'Got business there too, heya?'

Another shrug.

Ruby bit her lip. Another quick gulp of wine.

'What is wrong, Ruby?'

'You lend me thirty thousand dollar, okay?'

'US or Hong Kong?'

'US.'

Lucien shook his head. 'You never change.'

Ruby slumped in her chair. She looked for all the world like a sulky little girl who had been denied a special treat. 'Not for me this time, okay. For my mother in Guangzhou. Has terrible bad cancer, must come to Hong Kong for operation. No shit.'

'You are a liar, Ruby. It is what I love about you.'

'Not propaganda you, okay. Need this money for my mother.'

Lucien looked up. 'Here is our chilli crab.'

The waiter placed the steaming dish on the table between them, two finger bowls at their elbows. Lucien leaned forward. He had forgotten how hungry he was. 'The food here is better than in Hong Kong. Don't you think?'

Ruby ignored him. 'Tell you the truth, okay?'

'I do not think I can stand it.'

'Think it is so funny if your Ruby gets chopped?'

'How much does your cancerous mother lose at baccarat?'

'Five hundred thousand Hong Kong.'

Lucien shook his head, automatically halved the figure to allow for Ruby's propensity to exaggerate her dilemmas for her own benefit. It was still a lot of money. Poor Ruby.

Lucien cracked a claw. 'I must think about this.'

'No time to think! Want to see me dead, heya?'

Lucien teased some of the juicy meat from the claw and considered. 'How long since I last saw you? Five months? Things have changed, Ruby. I've changed.'

'You are number one when I first meet you. Now just a pile of dog business.'

'Ruby, you possess such eloquence when you need to explain your feelings.'

'Got to help me, okay?' She leaned forward, and he felt her tiny hand on his knee. As he cracked another claw it moved along his thigh. 'Pliss. Make you very happy, no shit. Be your girl for always.'

Lucien sucked the meat from the claw. 'Eat something. The chilli crab is magnificent.'

Ruby reacted as if she had been slapped. She stood up suddenly, fumbling for her bag. Her hands were shaking. She is really in very big trouble this time, he thought. I have never seen her like this.

'Wait,' he said. He dipped his fingers in the fingerbowl and wiped them clean on the napkin at his elbow. He reached inside his shirt and produced a business card. 'Call me okay. Tomorrow.'

Ruby looked at the card and then deliberately tore it into small pieces and dropped it in the chilli crab. 'Think you are my good friend,' she said. 'Just cheat me up like

everyone else.' She hoisted her bag on her shoulder and tottered out.

Hong Kong

Ruby arrived back in Hong Kong at four o'clock that afternoon. She was still inside the ferry terminal when her mobile phone rang.

She took it out of her shoulder bag and flipped open the receiver. Fellow passengers pushed past her, heading towards the exits.

'Ruby-ah.'

'Eddie. You got to talk louder, can hardly hear you.'

'Where is the money, Ruby-ah?'

'What money, okay?' She searched the crowds, at the ticketing booths, on the escalators, the restaurant. Was he in Shenzhen or somewhere in the terminal, watching her?

'Ah Lam says you owe three hundred and twenty thousand Hong Kong from our last transaction in Golden Mountain. Where is the money, Ruby-ah?'

'Don't owe you, okay. Pay everything. Pay it to White Dragon S&L, like you say. I will never cheat you, heya.'

'Ruby-ah . . .'

'Got to believe me this time!'

'Ah Lam says you are losing money at baccarat again. You break your promise.'

Ah Lam. *Vincent*! That piece of dogmeat. His most secret orifice was the recipient of several ten thousand jade stalks before yours, Eddie-ah! 'Do not gamble with your money. Maybe Vincent is the one who is cheating you, okay.'

'Ruby-ah . . .'

There was a long silence. 'Still there, Eddie?'

'Do not make me weep all my tears at your funeral, little flower,' he said and hung up.

76

They met in a restaurant in Amoy Street near the Hopewell Centre. It was cramped and steamy hot, with laminated tables and chairs, one window facing out onto the street. There were four Chinese at the next table, three men in business suits, one of them quoting interest rates into a cellular phone, a woman reading that morning's Asian *Wall Street Journal*.

Lacey ordered congee. Keelan hesitated over the English menu. The ancient waiter offered him sausages and fried eggs.

'Yeah, okay,' Keelan said.

'You'll regret it,' Lacey said.

'Why?'

'You'll see.'

She poured two cups of the green Chinese tea and loosened her jacket. 'How's the drug business?'

'Good. At least I don't believe I'm going to make myself redundant in the next couple of years.'

'Every cloud.'

'Yeah, right. So.' He leaned on the table, smiled. 'How was your head after the other night?'

'Sore.'

'I wanted to say thank you.'

Lacey feigned surprise. 'Was I *that* drunk?'

'I mean, for, you know, what you said. Listening. I get kind of morbid sometimes. But it was good to talk.'

'I'm a good listener. It's why I get so many convictions.'

'Well I guess it's better than having the truth beaten out of you.'

'I can do that as well.'

The waiter brought their breakfasts. Keelan stared at his. A

fried egg, a sausage, a square slice of processed ham floating in a bowl of noodle soup. Christ.

Lacey spooned the congee into her mouth. 'Told you.'

'I knew I should have ordered the muesli.'

'Chicken congee is actually a nourishing and satisfying breakfast. Better for you than the rubbish you eat.'

'Hey, don't dump on cold coffee and a cigarette till you've tried it.' He moved the sausage around the bowl, poked the egg with a fork. Rock hard. No, it was hopeless. If he was going to eat breakfast out, he would have to learn to like congee or go to McDonald's.

'Still sucking on the noxious weed?'

'I haven't smoked for three whole days.'

'Who are you trying to impress?'

'You, Lace.' He reached out and touched her hand. 'Can you put your congee down a moment?'

She smiled and leaned closer. 'That's such a romantic thing to say.'

Keelan looked awkward. 'Look. Lace. Can we start again?'

'You mean with me abusing you in my office?'

'Well maybe take it on a bit from there. Maybe just a few scenes on from the point where you decided I was an utter asshole.'

'What makes you think there was ever a time I didn't think that?'

'You've got a point.'

She grinned and looked at her watch. 'Have to go to work. The bodies will be piling up in the streets if I'm not there in ten minutes.'

'When can I see you again?'

'Tomorrow's Sunday. Charlotte goes to Mass.'

'Praise the Lord.'

'Exactly. I'll be home all day to hear confessions.'

'Will you hear my sins at nine o'clock?'

'I can do better than that,' Lacey said. 'I can be a part of them.'

Hong Kong, ablaze with electric and neon. Ruby watched the red flashing lights of an airliner disappear into the brilliance of

Kowloon. The cigarette trembled in her fingers. She pressed her forehead against the cold glass.

Got nowhere to run, Ruby-ah! Go to the Land of the Golden Mountain, Eddie will find me. Go to New York, Sydney, maybe Amsterdam, I got no friends there, no cash, just a few fake credit cards, how can I hide? One day Eddie will hear a whisper on the wind and he will chop me down. Got to pay Eddie back or doesn't matter where I run.

The buzzer to her apartment jolted her from her thoughts. Her eight o'clock appointment. The man selling insurance.

'Yes?'

'John Keelan, Ruby. If you've got any number four up there, better flush it down the toilet fast and let me up. Okay?'

It had been almost a month since he had seen her, in Maha Chai. It was as if it had never happened. She leaned against the door jamb in a cherry red cheongsam, slight and overtly sexual, her baby doll face made severe by the short, backswept hair. He could smell her perfume, and it both aroused him and made him wary.

'You've been crying,' he said.

'Got very sad life now,' she said. She looked over his shoulder. 'Not going to arrest me, okay?'

'Not yet.'

'Better come in,' she said.

'Thanks.' She closed the door behind him. He looked around. Clothes scattered everywhere, a suitcase open on the dining table. 'Going somewhere, Ruby?'

'Got nowhere to go. Want a drink?' He noticed she staggered slightly as she made her way to the bar in the corner of the room.

'Mineral water?'

'Don't have.'

'Coke?'

'Coke I have.'

'Nice apartment,' he said.

'Not mine. Belong to a friend.'

'Eddie Lau?'

Ruby gave him his Coke but did not answer.

'Last time I saw you was in Bangkok. The circumstances were a little different then.'

'You angry wif me?'

'No, I'm not angry with you. But I do have a few questions I need to ask you. Mind?' he said, indicating the black leather sofa. He sat down.

'Got to get better tailor, John,' Ruby said. 'When you sit like that you look like somebody's washing.'

'Don't change the subject, Ruby. We were talking about you. And why you left Bangkok in such a hurry.'

'Just got crazy, okay? Maybe the heat. Prison make you go crazy.' She fumbled with her cigarettes.

'You smoke too much,' Keelan said. She offered him the packet and he shook his head. 'I've given up. You should try it. Deep breaths and drink a glass of water. Works for me.'

'Not good for you.'

'Smoking?'

'Giving up. What the matter with you, heya? Want to live for ever?'

'Sometimes it feels like I have.'

'Smoke all my life and I am still alive, so where is the problem?'

Keelan leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. 'Ruby, where did you go after Bangkok? Where have you been and what have you been doing?'

'Visit my auntie in China. Very sick. Got cancer.'

'How's Eddie Lau?'

'Send his regards.'

'Great. Does he know you've been talking to us?'

'Do not tell him about our arrangement. Think he will be very mad wif me if he knows.'

'Our arrangement? We don't have an arrangement.'

Ruby came and knelt in front of him. She put her hands on his knees. 'You got a girl, John?'

'That is not why I'm here, Ruby.'

He felt her fingernails through the fabric of his trousers, moving along the inside of his thigh. 'Think about you terrible much. Maybe I can be your girl, okay.'

Keelan stood up, and went to the window. Christ, this

woman. When he turned around Ruby was kneeling by the leather sofa, her head bowed, staring at the floor. She looked like a juvenile who had been caught shop lifting.

'Ruby.'

She turned her head but would not look at him. Genuine regret or just planning her next gambit? She picked up her Dunhill lighter from the coffee table, tapping it on the glass surface, an impatient gesture, as if she was waiting for service.

'What's going on, Ruby?'

'In big trouble, this time,' she murmured. Her eyes filled with tears.

The sorry little girl act. Ruby had done this to him before.

'Got to help me, okay?'

'I don't got to do anything. I seem to remember trying to help you when you were on death row in Thailand. I pulled a lot of strings to try and out a deal for you. A couple of days later I'm standing there with my . . . looking stupid, because you've cut your own deal behind my back. I don't know if I want to do any more deals.'

There was a sharp crack. Ruby was biting her nails. 'What you think I should do, heya?' she hissed at him. 'Someone comes, says tomorrow we are going to get you out of his place! What shall I say? No thank you, must wait and see if American will get me ten years instead of twenty as special concession for Ruby? What will you do if you are me, okay? You will do what I do: they open doors, you fuck off quick!' She drew deeply on the cigarette, trying to stay in control. 'Had it with this life, John. Hate it so much. Don't know how I end up like this.'

Well, I could give you a hint, he thought, but he kept that opinion to himself. Instead, he said: 'You said that to me once before.'

'Don't know what it is like for me! Got to live, got to survive.'

'And how are you managing to survive these days? With a little help from Eddie Lau?'

'Maybe.'

'Maybe,' Keelan grunted. 'Can I ask where I can find him?'

Ruby shook her head. 'Do not know, John. Tell you for true this time.'

'You wouldn't know the truth if it jumped out from behind the curtain with a fucking neon sign around its neck and bit you on the butt.'

'Maybe we can do a deal, okay?'

'What kind of deal, Ruby?'

'I give you Eddie, you give me new life somewhere else. Long way away. New name, new papers.'

Keelan hesitated.

'Not propaganda you this time, okay? Hate this life, this cheating, this drugs. Never know who is going to cheat you, who is going to hurt you. Live my whole life so scared for myself. Maybe now I want nice life, you know? Get out of Hong Kong. Nice quiet place somewhere, no drugs, no triad. Maybe make some babies. We got a deal, okay?'

'There's no easy way to do this.'

Ruby put her face in her hands. Maybe she's really hurting this time, Keelan thought. If she's genuine we can make a big score. Or perhaps it's just another game, and I'm being pushed around like a piece on a chessboard. We'll play this out, but don't get excited. Not yet.

'Been stupid all my life. Done so many wrong thing. Think I am so smart. Not smart at all. Just stupid, stupid.'

'I can help you, Ruby. But you have to do exactly what I tell you. Okay?'

Ruby nodded. 'Okay,' she said.

77

Lacey opened the door in a white silk dressing gown. She smelled of *mousse de bain*, and pale pink gloss glistened on her lips. 'Oh my God, it's the drug squad,' she said.

Keelan smiled. 'If you've done nothing wrong, you have nothing to be afraid of.'

'I suppose you want to do a body search,' she said and closed the door.

He stood in the hallway, staring at her. He wondered what Anna would make of him now, would make of her. No matter how hard he tried she always came unbidden into his consciousness whenever he was with Madeleine Lacey.

'Penny for your thoughts,' she said.

'Not worth even that much.'

'Change your mind now,' Lacey said, 'and I'll shoot you. I'll go back to the office, I'll get Tyler's midnight special, and I'll drill you. Is that clear?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Good.'

He reached forward, slid his fingertips inside the robe, gently slipped the silk off one shoulder. 'You're beautiful, Lace,' he whispered.

'And fragile. Please handle with care.'

'I promise,' he said, his voice hoarse. He pushed Anna and Caroline from his consciousness. Blotted them out with an act of will. He did not think he could face hurting another woman as long as he lived.

He felt her fingers on his cheek. He kissed her fingers, the palm of her hand. 'Is this going to work out?' she whispered.

'I don't know.'

'I'm ready to hear your confession now,' she said. In her

perfect picture they made love on the bed. Everything was arranged. There were clean silk sheets, and the bed was carefully rolled back, the blinds open just enough to let in a little light.

But when the moment came there was no time for finesse and they took each other, standing up, in the passageway. And afterwards they collapsed on the silk carpet, laughing.

Chevrons of light filtered through the blinds. Keelan rolled on his side and stroked Lacey's naked back, tracing a finger down the long curve of her spine.

She opened one eye. 'If you keep doing that I'll start purring,' she said.

He kissed her shoulder. 'I feel like a weight's been lifted off my shoulders.'

'I think the weight was a little lower down.'

He laughed. 'Can I ask you a personal question?'

'Have I been tested for AIDS? How much money have I got? Do I have connections to organised crime?'

'How old are you?'

'Shit, that's a lot worse.' She turned her head and smiled at him from the pillow. 'How old do you think I am?'

'Oh, Christ.'

'You started this.'

'If I go too high you'll never speak to me again. If I go too low you'll think I think you're immature.'

'How old?'

'Twenty-one.'

'You think I'm immature.'

'For real? I guessed twenty-five.'

'Not bad. Twenty-seven. Last birthday.'

'You look much younger.'

'Wimp.' She sighed as his hands kneaded the muscles in her shoulders. 'Was there a hidden agenda behind the question?'

'I'm thirty-six. Just thought you ought to know.'

'Practically a baby boomer. You must remember the Beatles.'

'Sure. Some day I'll tell you about the Buddy Holly

concert I went to before I went off to fight the Korean war.'

'Charlotte thinks all Americans are iniquitous.'

'What does that mean? Is that a Spanish word?'

'It means depraved. Immoral.'

'I find that a little rich coming from a country that elected Ferdinand Marcos. How come you can afford a maid?'

'I told you, I have an independent income.'

'So why are you a cop?'

'I'm trying to save the world. I'm an idealist. Aren't you?'

He didn't answer.

'I was married once,' she said suddenly.

'I didn't know that.'

'It lasted eleven months. He was an executive at Jardine Matheson. I imagine he thought it was cute and unconventional dating a policewoman. After we were married it just embarrassed him. He wanted me to give it up. Just assumed I would.'

'And?'

'And two weeks into our marriage I transferred to Serious Crimes. My life turned into a Rambo movie – all violence and no sex. In the end he accused me of caring more about organised crime than I did about my own life.'

'Was he right?'

'What do you think?'

'Sounds like you're talking about me.'

His hands circled her back in rhythm. She groaned. 'You have a talent, Keelan.'

'Everybody has to be good at something.'

'Well, I think you've find your vocation.' She rolled over, her hands above her head. 'I think that side's done,' she whispered. 'I think you'd better start on the front.'

After she had showered, Lacey told him that a friend of Mac's, Tom Devoy, had invited her out for an afternoon sail. Keelan was invited too. He cooked them omelettes for lunch and then they drove through the Aberdeen Tunnel into Happy Valley and Causeway Bay.

The *Atoll* was a thirty-foot gaff-rigged ketch, the hull built

from teak, appointed with brass. 'Beautiful boat,' Keelan said, as they climbed aboard in the Causeway Bay typhoon shelter.

'A real boat,' Tom said, grinning. He pointed to a thirty-foot fibreglass yacht. 'Not like some of this tupperware.'

Out on the harbour Hong Kong was no longer a city of cramped and carbon monoxide corridors. Black-eared kites patrolled the currents a hundred feet above them, there were still thick green forests around Cape Collinson and Lei Yue Mun and Joss House Bay. From a distance, it was again a beautiful city. 747s soared from the runway at Kai Tak and roared overhead, following the channel east, the sun glinting on their silver skin, the white monoliths of Kwun Tong a benign backdrop.

They could not escape the ugliness completely. Slicks of refuse floated past them as far as Sai Wan Ho. Keelan caught Lacey staring hard into the water. 'Stop looking for bodies,' he said.

'Only if you stop looking at the trawlers. I know you're itching to pull them over and search the holds.'

'Look at this junk in the water.'

'Tom says that when you get a few kilometres off shore the water changes colour suddenly. It's like a thermocline. There's a brown line and then the water changes back to blue. You leave all the rubbish behind.'

'You can never really leave the shit behind,' he said.

His mood changed without warning. He took his beer and went to sit on the cockpit behind the mast.

Something had happened to him in the last few days, he realised. He was happy. There was a lightness in his soul that had not been there for a long time, since before the shooting, before the whole Bertolli thing. For almost a week now he had not woken in the middle of the night to pace the room, to stare for long exhausted hours at the television screen, at movies in Mandarin, at sports he did not like, Asian soccer matches featuring teams from places he had never heard of.

It was the beginning of forgetting.

It did not please him. The gnawing sense of failure and guilt

was replaced by self-condemnation. How long does love last? Two years? Perhaps if it was just Anna, he could have forgiven himself, moved on. But he could not forgive himself for what had happened to his daughter.

So easy to find someone else and dismiss them. To tell himself he had paid his penance. But by his own judgement he had paid no price at all.

Lacey watched him, his back pressed against the mast, staring out towards Waglan island and the distant horizon. The thousand-yard stare. Once again he had moved away from here, out of reach. Without warning.

'Is he all right?' Tom asked her, from the helm.

She shrugged. How could she explain?

I could allow myself to love this man, she thought. But she sensed it would be a mistake. His past had created something in him that precluded happiness, an appetite for self-destruction. She sensed that for him there could be no atonement until he had found a way to destroy himself. Perhaps then his conscience would be satisfied.

78

It was an old French villa, reproduced on the side of Mount Kellett, green shuttered windows, a *porte cochère*, the stucco painted a pastel blue. The rear of the house was shaded by Chinese hackberry and shiny wax trees. The driveway to the house led along a winding path that evil spirits would not be able to follow, and was sheltered by bowers of jasmine, mountain sesame and wild indigo. It overlooked the water, Aberdeen harbour and Ap Lei Chau. Good *feng shui*, Ruby thought. A good luck place.

There were two Mercedes in the garage, Ruby noticed, a red 480 SEL and a black customised saloon with spoilers. Little Lucien has been seduced, she thought. And a man who has been seduced once can so easily be seduced again and again.

An amah led Ruby through the house to the rear terrace. An electric blue pool was surrounded by a manicured green lawn. Ruby heard the sound of a man's voice and a woman laughing. Competition.

The terrace was tiled in marble, shaded by a verandah supported by white columns. The Jacuzzi was a later addition, made from Baltic pine, and was large enough to comfortably accommodate a football team. But at that moment it was occupied by only two people. One of them was Lucien. Ruby did not recognise the girl. A Filipina, she guessed. She was wearing a black bikini.

The girl stopped laughing when she saw Ruby. Lucien leaned back, his arms along the sides of the hot tub, and smiled. The security at the gate house had already announced her arrival.

'Ruby.'

She had dressed for the occasion, a black velour dress

with gold embossed dragons, long sleeved, shoes in black and gold suede. It had the desired effect. Being a woman in this business has its advantages and disadvantages, she thought. Most men live their lives through one bit of gristle.

'Ruby!' Lucien said. 'I thought you had torn up my card. I thought well, I shall never see Ruby Wen again. And here you are.'

'Not that hard to find,' she said. She had memorised the number before she tore up the card and dropped it in his food. Her luck might have deserted her at the baccarat table but she still knew how to count.

'Why don't you go for a swim?' Lucien said to his companion.

The girl climbed out of the tub, shot a glance of pure venom at Ruby, who smiled sweetly back. The girl dived into the pool. Ruby sat down on the rattan chair beside the Jacuzzi.

Lucien was watching her, smiling. There was a thick rope of gold around his neck, which glistened against the damp mat of black hair on his chest. Five months can be a long time in the life of a hungry young man. Ruby thought.

'A drink?' Lucien said.

Ruby shook her head.

'I have been thinking about this thirty thousand dollars.'

'Don't need thirty thousand dollars.'

'Good. I am not going to give it to you.'

Ruby turned around. The girl was watching them, her arms on the side of the pool.

Lucien smiled. 'Come on in, Ruby. Relax.'

Ruby stood up. She took off her Piaget wristwatch and placed it carefully on the chair. Then with one movement she reached behind, released the zipper on the dress, and peeled it off. She was naked underneath.

She climbed in to the frothing water but kept her distance from Lucien. 'How is Kwo-chao?'

'My papa is dying,' Lucien said.

Ruby searched his face to see if he was making fun of her.

'It is true,' Lucien said. 'He has cancer in his lung. The doctor gives him three months. Poor bastard.'

'You nearly wait too long, heya.'

'Yes. I nearly waited just a little too long.'

'This your house?'

'In three months,' Lucien said, and smiled again. 'It would have been mine anyway. I suppose. So hard to know how my father's mind works.'

'So now you are big businessman.'

'My father is a much more amazing man than I ever realised. He has businesses everywhere. Bangkok, here, even Vientiane for Christ's sake. Some are even legitimate.'

'Sell and get out, heya. Not survive in this business.'

'We will see.'

She leaned back with her head against the wooden rim of the tub. He felt her toes stroke his groin. Little minx. 'Got deal for you, okay.'

'What sort of deal?'

'In Macao you say you got business in America. New York, West Coast, where?'

'West Coast.'

She arched her eyebrows and waited.

'San Francisco,' he said.

'What sort of business you got, okay?'

'How can we conduct delicate business negotiations when you are doing this with your toes?'

'That is why is delicate, heya.'

He pushed her foot away. Christ, he was hard as a rock. 'What do you want, Ruby?'

'Sell chicken in San Francisco maybe?'

He understood the triad slang. 'Maybe.'

'Buy chicken for too much, maybe I can sell you cheaper. Sell chicken not enough, maybe then I buy.'

Lucien wondered who she was working for these days. Baptiste would know. 'One-ten a unit,' he said, automatically adding on an additional ten per cent.

Ruby had shifted her position in the tub so that she was sitting over one of the water jets. 'This is real nice, no shit.' Her voice was hoarse. 'No name for this in the Tao, heya. What will you call it? Fragrant water rushing past jade gate.'

'Ruby. We are talking about chicken.'

Ruby shifted again, her face flushed. 'Can buy this chicken in San Francisco.'

'Of course.'

'Buy from you at one-ten. Fifteen unit. When you deliver, okay?'

I should have gone higher, Lucien thought. 'A week.'

'Week is okay.'

'Half down, half on delivery.'

Ruby looked as if she was going to choke. 'Cannot. Do business you and me how many time? Can trust me. Pay you in San Francisco.'

'A third.'

Ruby slapped the water with her hand. 'Need this, okay? No shit. Give you half in San Francisco. Not now. Cannot.'

Lucien considered. In the last few months he had learned a lot about the business, and as Baptiste had taught him, the golden rule was always to do business with someone you knew. The problem with moving heroin inside the States was finding buyers who had the money and weren't the police. Baptiste's syndicate could never compete with the Chinese, the amounts they could move, the guarantees of supply, their contacts inside the States. Fifteen units was over one and a half million dollars. For that they could perhaps give Ruby a little room to manoeuvre in whatever dangerous game she was playing. As long as they had half in the bank before any powder changed hands.

'Shake on our deal, okay?' Ruby said. She moved closer and he felt her hand squeeze gently between his legs. He tried to grab her but she moved quickly away, laughing deep in her throat. 'Don't butterfly when your girlfriend watching you. You out of your mind? Manila girls all crazy. She cut it off for you, no shit.'

Ruby got out of the tub. She stood dripping on the marble and started to dry herself with a towel. Her body was like sculpted ivory and water gleamed on her torso like a dusting of tiny diamonds.

'What about this thirty thousand?' Lucien said.

'Do this deal I solve all my problem, you sell your chicken for a good price. Everybody wins, heya.'

She picked up her dress and wriggled her body into it. It wasn't her body that stirred him, Lucien realised, it was something else. Her secrets. Her deceptions. It was the dark moist places of her soul that excited him. He was greedy for her. So many dimensions to conquer. You could never get bored with Ruby, he thought. Could never be completely sure of what you possessed.

He loved this life.

'Do this deal then you quit,' Ruby said to him. 'Never be any good at this. Tell you this for true. Listen to Ruby, okay?' The sound of a zipper. As she walked away she shouted to the girl in the pool: 'Boyfriend ready for you now. Ruby done all the hard work!'

And then she was gone.

79

Keelan was depressed by the inroads that the American fast food culture had made overseas. Perhaps it was some small payback for the heroin the Asians had flooded onto the streets of urban America. Some, but not much.

The McDonald's in Kowloon was crowded with young Chinese, many of them wearing baseball caps and Converse running shoes and track pants. Why does the whole world want to look like homeboys from downtown Detroit? Keelan wondered.

There were alarms going off everywhere, people putting aside their cheeseburgers to stare at their pagers. An electronic nightmare. At the table closest to him were four young Chinese women with their children. The women were dressed K-Mart, terry towelling tracksuits and cheap joggers. The exotic Orient, Keelan thought, and turned his attention back to his companion.

By contrast Ruby was wearing black Azzedine Alaïa, cut to mid-thigh, and scarlet pumps. There was gold at her wrist and her throat, and her earrings were gold also, an inch long with jade hearts. She had two Big Macs in front of her. After all, Keelan was paying.

He could see people openly staring. I don't blame them, he thought. It would not have looked more incongruous if she had been the Queen of England sucking a thickshake through a straw.

'The deal's set up,' he said. 'If you co-operate, we promise you immunity and you'll go on the Witness Protection Programme. A new life, a new identity, in the United States.'

Ruby looked nervous. She ignored the food, lit a cigarette, her foot tapping impatiently at the ground. 'Never see my family again?'

'What family?' Keelan worked the lid of his cardboard cup and sipped his coffee. It was the colour of mud. He grimaced and pushed it aside. 'Ruby, I don't want any screw-ups this time. You wanted my help once before and you ran out on me. It happens again, I swear, I cut you loose.'

'Will help you, okay. You got Ruby's word.'

'Give me one good reason why I should believe you.'

'Because you want to,' Ruby said.

Keelan shook his head. Canny little bitch, as Mac would have said.

'Even if I don't do this, they going to chop me anyway, no shit.'

'Who is?'

'My Eddie-ah.'

'Why?'

'Some foolishness.' Ruby bit into her Big Mac. Keelan wondered how she could eat so much and stay so thin. 'Very scared now, okay.'

'I believe you. But if you help us you'll have no reason to be scared any more. We can protect you, Ruby. We can give you that new life you were talking about.'

'What you want me to do, okay?'

Keelan leaned closer. 'First of all, where's Eddie Lau?'

'Shenzhen side.'

'China?'

'Comes in, goes out, whenever he want. Never stay more than two, three days.'

'How does he get in and out?'

Ruby shrugged. 'Speedboat.'

Mac had told Keelan about the speedboats. The triads would steal a new Mercedes, drive it on the back of a custom-built speedboat in Tai O with three others. The boats would have a bank of outboards on the stern, and could travel at sixty knots, easily outrunning the navy and police patrol boats. They could have the cars on the China side in fifteen minutes, where they could be resold without risk and for a huge profit. On the return leg the lighters could land and hide in any one of Hong Kong's two hundred and thirty-five islands.

'We want him, Ruby.'

Ruby shook her head. 'Cannot. Don't know where he is today, tomorrow. When he comes to Hong Kong, just comes.'

'How do you stay in contact?'

She reached into her bag and took out her mobile phone. 'Call him up. Shenzhen side.'

'And he can call you?'

She nodded.

'Tell me how he operates.'

Ruby picked up her thickshake. Stalling? Keelan wondered. 'Don't know, okay.'

'You don't know. What does that mean?'

'Don't know. No shit.'

'You must know.'

'Just a cut out, okay? Eddie say go there, Ruby go. Eddie say do this, Ruby do it. Eddie Lau not stupid.'

'Tell me what you do know. Don't screw me around, Ruby —'

' —not screw you around, okay!' she hissed. 'Think this is just some street gang, heya! Eddie sell a lot of chicken. Don't get to be big boss being stupid!'

'Just tell me how it operates.'

'First I go to America, okay. Always Golden Mountain.'

'San Francisco?'

'San Francisco. Maybe regular customer, maybe Eddie says you talk to this guy for me, give me a name. I cut a deal. I tell Eddie, he says okay. Tell me where to get chicken. I make the deal, fly back to Hong Kong.'

'You bring the money with you?'

Ruby shook her head. 'Go to Chinese bank, maybe travel agent. They give me receipt. They make phone call, Shenzhen side. Give money to Vincent Tse.'

The underground banking system; Keelan had heard of it. A maze of international Chinese banks, travel agencies and bullion dealers using secret radio stations and scrambled telephone lines to move billions of narcodollars within a few hours and leaving no traceable records. Most triad heroin money was moved this way inside Asia. Keelan knew that

one leading Thai bank routinely used the system to transfer five million dollars a day out of Bangkok. The whole shadowy tangle was as yet beyond the knowledge and the reach of the West.

So far Ruby was offering tantalising glimpses of her world but giving nothing away. It was like punching air, Keelan thought. So far all he had was a phone number in China and an S&L in San Francisco. Dead ends.

'We need to set up a deal,' he said. 'Have to lure Eddie to the US.'

'Never happen.'

'Why not?'

'I tell you. Eddie not stupid.'

Keelan considered a moment. There had to be some way, if they had Ruby as the bait. 'When's the next deal, Ruby?'

'Fly to Golden Mountain tomorrow night. If I don't get chopped.'

'Who are you meeting?'

'Regular customer.'

'What's his name?'

'Name is John Bertolli,' Ruby said, as softly as she could.

Keelan sighed and leaned back in his chair. Ruby returned her attentions to her hamburger.

Christ, he thought.

He fumbled for his cigarettes, lit one. He felt numb. I should feel something, he thought. Elation, anger, something. Instead, all he could think was: five days without a cigarette and now I'm smoking again.

Ruby finished eating and picked up the thickshake. 'Look like you seen a ghost, heya.'

'John Bertolli?'

'You know this guy?'

'Perhaps.'

'Give you big tip, John. Big customer. Ten unit every three months. No shit.'

Keelan took a deep breath. Keep a lid on this, he told himself. Don't get too eager, and make mistakes. But Bertolli . . . oh, he really wanted Bertolli.

They would need wiretaps, the dope on the table. Ruby would have to get in front of a Grand Jury and spell it all out. That way they could put him away under RICO, and he'd never see the light of day again. And John Keelan would have his revenge.

He stared at Ruby. Could he trust this woman? Was she really scared enough to go all the way with them on this? 'I want you to set this deal up, Ruby. Just go ahead as normal. I'll contact you again in San Francisco. Where are you staying?'

'Mandarin Oriental.'

'How long will you be there?'

'Three, four days.'

'Better plan on a week. We'll contact you there. But don't step out of line. We'll be watching every step of the way. Change a tampon there'll be one of our people holding the other end of the string.'

'Told you, finished with that life. Don't go bad for you this time.' She smiled again. 'Trust me, this one time. No shit. Okay?'

But Keelan wasn't listening.

He was thinking about a wet evening in Berkeley, and he was thinking about John Bertolli.

The phone rang in Lacey's office. 'Lacey.'

'Lace? It's John.'

'Hello *yanqui*. How's things?'

'Look, I won't be able to make dinner tonight.'

Right, yeah. She had been expecting this. 'Got a better offer?'

'I have to fly to San Francisco. Work.'

'How long will you be gone?'

'Maybe a week.'

Lacey felt a stab of disappointment. She was going to miss him. 'Okay. Well. Take it easy.'

'I'll see you when I get back.'

He hung up.

Lacey sat for a moment, staring at the phone. Don't fool yourself, she thought. This is going nowhere.

80

San Francisco

Ruby walked through the foyer of the Hyatt on Union Square. The sounds of guests arriving and departing echoed around the lobby as if they were inside a vast cavern, which in some ways they were. The atrium lobby rose all the way to the ceiling, glass elevators beetling up and down one wall like a scene from a Wellsian fantasy. Ruby found Bertolli in the coffee shop, with two other men.

They were carrying, Ruby noted. The usual thing. These people were so obvious.

Bertolli rose to greet her, as did the other two men, awkward with this enforced civility. Bertolli was the only one who smiled. 'Ruby,' he said and took her small hand in both paws. 'Looking great. Sit down, sit down. Want a drink?' Bertolli did not introduce the other two men and Ruby politely ignored them. 'So how are things?'

'Okay,' Ruby said.

They exchanged small talk about the weather and politics, then Bertolli brought the conversation abruptly to business. 'So what can I do for you, Ruby?' He was a regular buyer, and Ruby normally handled the minutiae of delivery through one of his lieutenants. He was probably expecting to negotiate down a price rise.

'Got deal for you,' she said.

'What kind of deal?'

'Don't deal for ten units no more. From now, smallest order is fifteen.'

Bertolli shook his head. 'Jesus fucking Christ. You people are unbelievable.' Bertolli stroked his jaw. The stubble rasped under his nails. 'Let me think about this.'

'For fifteen units I can give you thirteen.'

She watched Bertolli make a quick calculation. These days, sure, there was a lot of competition from cocaine. But the buyers were still there, and Bertolli had been steadily increasing his orders by one unit every six months.

'You saying you going to cut me off if I don't take fifteen this time, right?'

'Got to factor in risk,' Ruby said.

Bertolli looked as if he had a sudden pain in his gut. 'Twelve and a half.'

Ruby shook her head.

'We're talking small change here.'

Small change, Ruby thought. Girl get chopped for small change where I come from. 'Thirteen. Fifteen units. Best I can do.'

Bertolli picked up his coffee cup. It was cold. Son of a bitch. Buying in another five units could drag the price down. Sure, he could look for another supplier, but that was the way guys got burned. It had been this way since the eighties. If you wanted good dope, get yourself a good gook. 'I'll think about it,' he said.

'Be at the Mandarin. Wait for your call, okay.' Ruby said, and she walked away.

The Chevy Malibu was illegally parked just across the street. The man behind the wheel wore a dirty leather bomber jacket and jeans, his brown hair worn in a long pony-tail at the back. There was a clipboard on the seat beside him with a photograph of Ruby Wen stapled to a time sheet. He saw her jump into a taxi in the crowded forecourt of the Hyatt and he noted the time on the clipboard and started the engine.

It was a hot day and the Chevy's air conditioner wasn't working. His shirt felt as if it was glued to his back and the sweat had made his psoriasis itch. But he was prepared to endure these discomforts. He was being well paid.

81

Keelan was checked into a room at the Holiday Inn. There was a sofa and two chairs at the end of the room. Keelan was sitting with his feet on the sofa making notes in pencil on a yellow legal pad, his feet propped on one of the chairs. Mayhew, the bureau chief for San Francisco, was sitting at the writing table by the window reading the *Village Voice* and eating peanuts from a small tinfoil pack. There were files scattered on the table around him, and a faxed link analysis.

When he heard the two gentle taps on the door Keelan jumped from the sofa. He hurried across the room and threw open the door. 'Ruby,' he said.

Ruby looked around the room. 'No money in being policeman,' she said. 'Seen better accommodation in the Walled City, no shit.' She threw her bag on the bed, and noticed Mayhew for the first time. 'Who's this guy, okay?'

Keelan did not introduce Mayhew by name. 'He's a policeman, like me,' he said. Mayhew had told him he wanted to keep Ruby off balance.

Ruby sat on the sofa and lit a cigarette. 'Got a drink for a girl or you don't have expense account, heya?'

'What would you like, Ruby?'

'Whatever is most expensive. Take lot of risk for you.'

Keelan picked up a miniature of Hennessey and found a brandy balloon in the unit. Mayhew was sitting at the table watching Ruby like a scientist with an especially interesting specimen. He had not spoken a word. Ruby was trying to ignore him, but Keelan could tell he was driving her crazy.

He poured the brandy into a glass and brought it over.

'Your friend deaf and dumb?' Ruby said. 'Got to talk hand signals to him?'

'He lip reads,' Keelan said, and positioned the other chair so

that it was directly in front of her. Ruby was wearing a scarlet wool dress with a hemline three inches above her knee and a low neckline. He was aware of expensive perfume and the gold on her wrists and the diamonds on her fingers and her ears. He suddenly felt shabby; out of his league. 'So. How did it go, Ruby?'

'Okay.'

'What's okay?'

'Just okay. He is very nervous guy.'

Keelan felt a coldness in his chest. 'What's he nervous about?'

'How do I know, heya? Just nervous, okay. Going to call me. We make arrangements then.'

'It's going ahead?'

'Sure,' Ruby said, 'one hundred per cent guaranteed.'

Now Keelan knew there was something wrong. It was Ruby who was nervous, her movements too quick, like a bird on a wire; see you move and then they twitch and fly away. 'I hope so. We can't protect you if you don't do this deal, Ruby. You can't jerk us around on this.'

'Don't want to jerk you around, okay.' Ruby put her cigarette on the ashtray. The tip was smeared with her lip gloss. She drank her brandy and the ice rattled in the glass. 'I think this time he take fifteen unit.'

'That doesn't matter, Ruby. Ten units, fifteen units, as long as we have some dope to put on the table. The important thing is we have you. Because of you we're going to bust him on RICO.'

Ruby glanced at Mayhew. His brooding silence had rattled her.

Keelan leaned closer. 'Next time you meet Bertolli we want you to wear a wire.'

Ruby shook her head. '*Yau moh gau chor*! Got to be crazy!'

Keelan ignored her. 'Of course, you'll have to dress a little more conservatively. But Bertolli knows you, he trusts you, God help him. If we can tape your conversation, if you can get him to say all those things we want to hear, that a jury likes to hear, we're looking at a lot of time for Gino Bertolli.'

'Do what you want, okay.'

Mayhew spoke for the first time. For a slightly built man, his voice was dark and rich and resonant. It was a great tool in situations like this. 'We are relying on you Miss Wen. If, for any reason, I think you are not telling us the complete truth, then I will recommend that we do not waste the limited resources of this department, and that we cut you loose right now.'

Ruby looked genuinely intimidated.

Keelan stubbed out her cigarette for her. 'That's the deal, Ruby. If you don't help us we can't help you. There's no going back from here.'

'Got to go to bathroom,' Ruby said, standing up suddenly.

Keelan pointed to the door in the entry hall. 'Through there,' he said.

The door closed behind her. Keelan looked at Mayhew.

'What do you think, John?' Mayhew said, softly. 'She could be in there flushing an ounce down the toilet. Or doing a line.'

Keelan shook his head. 'She could just be taking a pee.'

'I don't even trust her to pee straight.'

'If you want to know, neither do I. But that's not the point. She needs us right now. If we stay on her case, if we give her nowhere to go, she has to help us. I think she's in big trouble with her triad. She has to stick with us. She's got no choice.'

The toilet flushed. Mayhew shrugged, not convinced.

Ruby came back into the room, met by silence. She resumed her position on the sofa, and crossed her legs. 'Feel better now,' she said. 'Shit, that was good coke.'

The two men looked at each other.

'Just a joke, heya,' Ruby said and she smiled sweetly at Mayhew.

82

'You know what they say,' Mayhew was saying, chewing on a piece of T-bone, 'all agents marry their informants sooner or later.'

They were in a steak house just off Union Square. Right now Ruby Wen would be in Silks in the Mandarin Oriental, Keelan thought, eating off Wedgwood Kutani Crane dinnerware, her food prepared by Howard Bulka. Keelan thought about what his father had always told him: Crime doesn't pay. Oh, yeah?

'I know what they say,' Keelan said.

'I just wonder if you have perspective on this.'

'In what way, sir?'

'Well, I guess you might not have noticed, but she's not an unattractive girl.'

'She doesn't affect me that way,' he said, and immediately wanted to bite off his tongue.

Mayhew laughed. 'What way, John?'

'She scares the hell out of me, all right?'

Mayhew ignored the caveat. 'Just that being attractive and being a woman it's possible that you can form some sort of attachment here, and that may blind you to the fact that one day you might have to arrest her.' Mayhew gulped down his beer. 'You slept with her?'

'I'd rather go to bed with a pit viper.'

'Just checking.'

'Believe me, sir I can stay objective on this.'

'I hope so, John.'

'She's in the hole deep with her own syndicate, and she has triad debt collectors looking for her in Hong Kong and Macao. This is not the sort of person I see as a future love interest.'

'Maybe not. But you still have a vested interest in believing what she says, don't you?'

'Sir?'

'Bertolli.'

'I didn't know about the connection to Bertolli when I recruited her as a CI. I knew she had a link with Eddie Lau and Louis Huu, that's all.'

Mayhew did not look convinced. 'Yeah, but you know about Bertolli now, don't you?' He finished his steak and signalled the waitress for two more beers. 'Not hungry, John?'

'Not any more.'

'You're smoking too much.'

'I've tried to give up three times in the last couple of weeks. Then I have one of these conversations and I start again.'

Mayhew looked away. He knew why Keelan wanted this one. He was just worried it might take away his objectivity.

'I'm keeping a close eye on this one, John. Next time this girl takes a pee there'll be one of my people standing there ready to hand her the tissues.' Mayhew finished his steak and put down his knife and fork. 'John, you do good work, I'm not trying to bust your balls on this. I'm just saying we've got to be careful. What if this story she fed you is just bullshit? She walks through customs with ten keys in her suitcase, if she gets caught she says, hey, I'm working for the DEA. She calls you in, throws up her little fluttery hands in horror, says all I'm doing is putting together this deal for you. No shit.'

'She still can't run away from the Eddie Lau and the triads.'

'Maybe that's all bullshit too. How do you know?'

'She has the connections we need.'

'She's only good to us while she plays straight, John. Otherwise she's just a distraction.'

Keelan nodded. Maybe Mayhew was right. Maybe he did want this one too much.

'Just be careful, John. We look the other way for just a second, I can guarantee there's going to be another card in this deck.'

The lobby of the Mandarin Oriental was inlaid with marble, an antique gilded Chinese goddess held court in the foyer. Lucien

Crocé sat a few yards away with a cup of coffee reading a copy of the *Herald Tribune*. He wore a dark grey suit with a white button-down Oxford and a yellow silk tie and matching display handkerchief. The silk socks under the Gucci loafers were also canary yellow. He looked what he was, Ruby thought; a wealthy if unconventional businessman.

She took the seat opposite him, and ordered a Rémy Martin and soda from the waiter.

'Ruby.'

'Got my chicken, heya?'

Lucien smiled. 'Sure. Right here in my pocket.' He reached into his jacket and Ruby felt the blood drain out of her face. But instead Lucien tossed a small card on the table. It was the cardboard sheath for his hotel keycard, and it had his room number written on it. 'If you could only see your face. You really think I would carry it around with me?'

'Never deal with amateur before.'

'You have such a low opinion of me.'

She picked up the card. 'What is this, okay?'

'My room number. In case you are lonely tonight.'

Ruby tossed it back. 'Never get lonely.'

'If you want fifteen units at one-ten, I think you will get very lonely.' He sipped his coffee and then returned his attention to his newspaper.

You great mountain of dog dung, Ruby thought. 'Not part of the deal, heya.'

'Ruby, you are always part of the deal. That is what makes you so interesting.'

'Where do I get my chicken?'

Lucien smiled again. 'I will whisper it tonight into your pillow.'

Maybe he will make it in this business, after all, Ruby decided. But not if he sells for one-ten.

Ruby finished her drink and got up to leave. She picked up the card. Well, why not? She could screw Lucien Crocé just as well lying down as standing up.

'Still need one third deposit,' Lucien said, as she walked away.

* * *

Louis Huu arrived on China Airlines flight 804 from Bangkok. His name was a permanent fixture on the Immigration Watch List and the official at the desk immediately picked up the telephone and advised his supervisor of the presence of the visitor now standing on the other side of his desk.

Louis Huu was detained for almost an hour before a visa was issued. In that time the San Francisco bureau of the Drug Enforcement Agency had been informed of his presence and when he climbed into the black Mercedes limousine waiting for him outside the terminal, a taxi, driven by a DEA surveillance officer, swung into position behind him.

An undetected surveillance on a single unit in heavy traffic can take up to six skilled and co-ordinated police units. That evening Mayhew's officers managed to succeed with just three. A van advertising itself as a home dog wash took over from the taxi, and a single motorcycle rider followed the Mercedes to its eventual destination in Palisades Drive in Daly City.

While Louis Huu was being trailed across the city by officers of the DEA, a Chevy Malibu parked in a loading zone a block from the Mandarin Oriental, one wheel on the kerb. The driver, a man in a bomber jacket with a greasy pony-tail, had the look and gait of a street dealer. When he walked into the lobby of the Mandarin, the house detective was immediately alerted.

But the man presented no problems. He did not attempt to ride the elevators. Instead he was greeted by one of the guests in the piano bar, and they spent half an hour in whispered conversation over coffees. They exchanged envelopes and then the man left.

Shortly afterwards Monsieur Luc Crocé retired to his room, the envelope folded into his suit jacket.

83

Mayhew met Keelan at the Holiday Inn for breakfast.

'Got some interesting news,' Mayhew said. 'Guess who's in town?'

'Frank Sinatra?'

'I hope not. Got enough mobsters already. I'm talking about Louis Huu.'

Keelan slammed down his coffee cup. 'When?'

'Last night. We followed him to a house in Daly City. Your girl's got connections with this guy, right?'

'She was ready to give him up in Bangkok.'

'We've put a Pen register on the line at the house, see who he calls. I've asked Bangkok to send us everything they have. Meanwhile we have to talk to your Ruby Wen and persuade her it's in her best interests to stand in front of a Grand Jury and give us enough to indict Mister Huu. You think she'll do it?'

'First, let's get Bertolli,' Keelan said.

Keelan held out the recorder. It was the size of a paperback novel, with a wire leading to a small microphone. 'This is it,' Keelan said.

Ruby took the recorder, and her face creased into a grimace of derision. 'What is this? CD player?'

'We could use a Kel transmitter,' Keelan said. 'They're just a miniature microphone, but they're unreliable and we only have one shot at this.'

'This supposed to be secret? My stereo system not this big! Got VCR and cassette player too?'

'Ruby . . .'

She looked at Mayhew. 'Where a girl going to hide this, heya?'

'You wear a long coat, keep it on. Tape the recorder to the small of your back, run the wire around the front of your chest.'

Ruby raised an eyebrow. 'You want to tape me up, okay?'

Mayhew and Keelan exchanged a look Ruby could not fathom. 'We figured you could manage that, Miss Wen.'

Ruby grinned at Keelan. 'Miss Wen. So polite this one.'

Mayhew leaned forward. 'You have to make it absolutely clear on tape what you're trading. We don't want an hour of fucking jargon in Italian and Cantonese. Remember that when you're doing this deal.'

Ruby refused to look at Mayhew. 'Not stupid,' she said to Keelan.

'Obviously you can't just reach behind you and turn this thing off and on . . .'

Ruby feigned shock. 'Can't rewind and check everyone talking loud enough?'

'. . . so it has to be running when you leave here. That gives you three hours.'

'Three hours plenty of time for a girl to get shooted.'

'We'll have two of our people in the restaurant, watching. If he finds the wire, they move in.'

'No shit.'

'No shit,' Keelan said. 'Get this deal on the wire and you're protected, Ruby. Absolutely.'

Ruby took the recorder and made for the bathroom.

'One more thing, Ruby,' Mayhew said.

'Want me to take Sonycam too? Hide in my underpants maybe?'

'Who were you talking to in the lobby of the Mandarin yesterday?'

Ruby put her hands on her hips and feigned outrage. 'You follow me?'

'Of course we followed you, Miss Wen.'

Ruby threw the recorder on the bed. 'My business, heya.'

'Not any more,' Keelan said, his voice even. 'Your business is our business. Or do you think you got us so bluffed we're not going to take precautions?'

He could see Ruby making her calculations, her face betraying first anger, then caution. 'Some businessman. Tries to pick me up.'

'According to our report you went and sat next to him.'

'Okay, try to pick him up, heya. Girl got her modest. Girl don't have to tell you everything.'

'Girl does,' Keelan said. 'You spent the night in his room.'

'What, you jealous, okay?'

'Ruby, what were you doing?'

'Fornicating.'

'We did some checking. This man's father is not unknown to us.'

Ruby looked trapped. Jesus, Keelan thought. Mayhew was right. We're playing with one deck, she has two. 'Ruby?'

She didn't answer. She picked up the recorder from the bed. 'Wear your wire, okay. Then you protect me. Everything else my business.'

'There's one other thing.'

Ruby looked at Mayhew, then back at Keelan. She knew what was coming.

'There's a friend of yours in town. Louis Huu.'

'*Dew neh loh moh*,' Ruby murmured.

'We talked about this guy in Bangkok, remember? We want him, Ruby, very badly. Now it may not come to this. But we have to know. If . . . and this is a big if . . . if we need someone to tie this whole thing up, if we need someone to take the stand . . .'

'You fucking crazy?'

'. . . take the stand and name the people, the places, the times . . .' Keelan shook his head and waved a hand to override the objections he knew were coming, '. . . now we don't want to do this, and this will be absolutely the last resort, but if this is what it takes, we have to know, Ruby . . .'

The fight seemed to go out of her. Ruby sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. She looked at Mayhew again. 'Going to make some people very irritated.'

'It's a risk.'

'Not for you, heya.'

'We have to know where we stand with you. This is a conspiracy case, and sometimes we just need that one witness that can hang it all together.'

'Already give you John Bertolli.'

'Well, we hope so, Ruby. But now we're raising the stakes. If you want our protection, we want Louis Huu as well.'

'Have to think about this. No shit.'

What did they have to bargain with? Keelan wondered. In half an hour Ruby was going to lunch with John Bertolli wearing a wire, and they were going to talk about a drug deal. Right now he knew there was nothing they would do to endanger that. Keelan looked at Mayhew who gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

'Don't cross us on this one.'

'Tell you everything I know about Eddie Lau, wear your stupid big radio to lunch with terrible big gangster who will kill me dead if he finds out! What do you want, heya?' She stormed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

'Histrionics,' Mayhew said.

'Why do I have the feeling something is going to go wrong?'

'Maybe because it is. But the bets are down, John. Let's see where the wheel stops.'

84

San Francisco

The North Beach area of San Francisco was a cousin of London's Soho and Hamburg's Reeperbahn, an extrovert ribbon of city street where transvestites, tourists and crazies rubbed shoulders among the strip joints, jazz clubs and restaurants. But in the back streets, away from the glitter of the neon, it was still Little Italy. There were still hand-painted signs saying *Farmacia*, and *Panatteria* and *Espresso*, fifty thousand Italians lived and played *bocce* and drank coffee in the cafés and attended mass in the narrow red brick churches.

Mama Fulvia's Ristorante was in the heart of this district, with black-and-white tiled floors and a dusty bar where the mama of the restaurant's name – who happened also to be John Bertolli's sister – presided over her little restaurant with the forbidding demeanour of a minor despot. Her staff wore long white aprons, black trousers, white shirts and braces and lived in fear of raising her ire.

Bertolli had his own table in the corner of the restaurant facing the windows. He ate at Mama Fulvia's every lunchtime to conduct business, except Sundays, when he ate at home after attending Mass with his family.

Bertolli was sitting with another man. Ruby recognised him. It was Trappatoni, a huge bull of a man who looked like a boxer and was actually the family's accountant and *consigliere*. They both rose to shake her hand.

'Sit down, please,' Bertolli said. 'Take your coat off. Get comfortable.'

'I'm cold,' Ruby said.

'Yeah I forgot. You come from a hot place,' he said,

displaying a charming ignorance of Hong Kong's climate. 'Hungry?'

Ruby shook her head.

'You got to eat. Look at you. You look like a concentration camp survivor.'

He beckoned to Mama Fulvia. Ruby caught the stare and knew what it meant. 'We don't do noodles,' she said to Ruby.

'She don't want noodles, Fulvia,' Bertolli said, and spread his hands in a gesture of despair. 'This is the nineties, okay. It's a cosmopolitan society. Don't you read *Newsweek*?'

Fulvia looked stung by the rebuke.

'What's good today?' Bertolli asked her.

'The risotto,' Fulvia said.

'*Risotto alla crema di scampi*,' Bertolli said to Ruby. 'It will put some meat on your bones.' He pinched her arm playfully. 'And a bottle of Chianti,' he said to Fulvia. 'Make sure it's cold.'

Fulvia gave Ruby the Look once more and moved away. Bertolli smiled apologetically. 'Don't mind her. She's racially prejudiced.'

Ruby shrugged. She could feel the recorder pressed between the small of her back and the chair. She looked around the restaurant, wondering who the DEA people were. If they are here at all, she thought. Maybe just more American bullshit.

Two men entered the restaurant and shouted a greeting in Italian to Bertolli and came over to shake his hand. As they moved away a waiter brought the Chianti and poured three glasses.

'Go ahead with our deal, okay?' Ruby said.

Bertolli smiled. 'Well, Ruby, there's a problem.'

Ruby gulped at her wine to steady her nerves. Can't be a problem. Never been a problem before. This one just too important, heya! 'What kind of problem, okay?'

Bertolli shrugged and looked at Trappatoni. 'Mister Bertolli has been approached by one of your . . . competitors,' said Trappatoni.

Ruby tried to control her panic. Could not lose this deal!

Just too important. How can such a thing happen? How can another supplier move in? Just not possible. This was Wah Ching territory. Eddie Lau was paying them a percentage for the action here. They were supposed to be protected.

'What is his name?'

Bertolli laughed and slapped the table to break the tension. 'Hey, Ruby. Come on. You don't expect me to tell you that. Besides, this is just business. Don't take it so hard.'

'What price you get?'

'Well, you give me your best price and I'll tell you if you compete.'

Ruby tried to concentrate. But all she could think was: I'm dead. This is the deal that is going to save my life. Now Eddie will have me chopped. How's a girl going to get out of this now?

'Don't understand,' Ruby said.

'Hey, it's simple. He gave me an offer I couldn't refuse.' Bertolli and Trappatoni both thought that was a really good joke.

She was trapped. There wasn't enough air in the restaurant. 'You okay, Ruby?' Trappatoni said.

'Twelve and a half,' she said. That would give her fifteen thousand a kilo and she could pay back everything she owed to Eddie and the Sun Yee On and still have a small profit.

Bertolli shook his head. 'Hey, Ruby, we're talking twelve here.'

'Okay, twelve.' No profit, but it would clear her debts.

'Sorry, Ruby. The deal's been done. Maybe we can do business next time. Here comes the scampi.'

The smell of food made Ruby want to vomit. She stood up suddenly, and her glass of Chianti spilled on the tablecloth. The sudden movement made the two men at the next table instinctively turn and reach inside their jackets.

Ruby ran outside. She stood in the bright California sunshine and felt the cold shadow of death brushing her shoulder.

Mayhew was in the bathroom; nerves always gave him diarrhoea. Keelan was sprawled on the sofa, staring numb at

the CNN news channel on the in-house television. Something had gone wrong. Their people at the restaurant had just called in. Ruby had just rushed out of the restaurant and into a taxi. They had lost her.

Christ, he had wanted Bertolli so bad.

Keelan jumped up when he heard the knock. He went to the door, looked through the spy hole.

Ruby.

He threw open the door and she pushed past him.

'Ruby? Ruby, you okay?'

Her face was flushed. 'Get everything for you.'

'Our people just called in. They said you left the restaurant running.'

'No, everything is okay. I get everything you want. You help me now, okay?'

There was something very wrong, Keelan knew it. Ruby threw her coat on the bed. Her hands were trembling as she peeled off her blouse. 'Get this thing off me,' she said, reaching behind her back and tearing at the tape.

Keelan helped her remove the recorder. 'What's the matter, Ruby?'

'Nothing is matter, I get what you want, no shit.'

Mayhew came out of the bathroom. Keelan passed him the recorder. He took out the tape. 'He's going to do the deal?'

'Heya, what is the matter? Wear the wire for you. Just like you want.'

'You're lying, Ruby. Tell us what happened.'

She stood in the middle of the room in her brassiere, her blouse crumpled in her fists. 'Deal is off,' she said.

'Deal's off?' Mayhew said. He held up the recorder. 'He found out about this?'

'Didn't find out. Cheated me, son of a bitch lump of dog gristle! Found another supplier, heya!'

Keelan slumped onto the sofa and put his head in his hands. 'Fuck.'

'I knew it,' Mayhew said. 'I knew we couldn't trust her.'

'Not Ruby's fault!' she shouted. 'Can't trust nobody in this business, no shit.'

Keelan picked up the recorder and threw it at the pillows on

the bed. 'Why don't I just go out and shoot that motherfucker in the head!'

'Feel sick,' Ruby said, and she dashed into the bathroom. They heard her vomiting into the washbasin.

Mayhew put his hand on Keelan's shoulder. 'I know how you feel about this,' he said gently.

'You don't know. You can't.'

'It's not over yet. Let's see what we've got on the tape.'

They slid it into the cassette deck Mayhew had brought with him. The tape was blank. They picked up the recorder and checked it.

Somewhere between the hotel and the restaurant the wire to the microphone had been pulled loose.

85

The Washington Hotel was in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco, a rundown and slightly dangerous section of the city that belonged to the winos and the transvestites and the crazies. It was a six storey brownstone, the air conditioners from the upper floors jutting out over the street. A sign tacked against a ground floor window announced vacancies.

A man in a tan Caprice sat outside watching the building, the doors locked. You could tell it was a hotel, the watcher thought, because the sign above the entrance said so. Otherwise you might be forgiven for thinking it was a shooting gallery.

At one stage during his vigil, a man in a torn T-shirt and soiled pin-striped trousers two sizes too small, the fly gaping open, emerged from a doorway and hammered on the windscreen with his fist. When he ignored him the man swore again, and urinated on the passenger side door.

Nice part of town, the watcher thought.

A little later two men stopped right next to the car and made a hurried exchange on the pavement, money and a small glassene packet changing hands. If only they knew, the watcher thought, and smiled grimly, reaching for his thermos of coffee.

It was the surveillance on the house in Daly City that had brought him here. You met a nicer kind of person out there, the watcher thought. It was a two-storey timber and brick house with uninterrupted views over San Francisco. No winos pissing on the wheels out there.

Early one morning one of his colleagues had followed a black Mercedes north to Point Lobos Avenue, onto Geary, and then into the mean streets of the Tenderloin. And the Washington.

As he watched a taxi drew up outside the hotel. A CAAC air crew climbed out and shuffled inside the hotel entrance. The watcher shook his head. So much for glamour. But what could you expect from an airline run by Beijing?

A dark blue Volkswagen van with 'Dana's Mobile Dog Wash' written on the side pulled up against the kerb a few yards in front of him. His replacement. The watcher noted the time on his sheet and pulled off into the traffic. He went to find breakfast in some part of town that didn't stink of tramp's piss.

Mayhew called Keelan at the Holiday Inn.

'Things are moving. I've scheduled a meeting with the assistant DA tomorrow morning. Do you have a pen?'

'Sure,' Keelan said, picking up the hotel's complimentary ballpoint and tearing off a piece of the hotel's headed notepaper from the pad beside the bed.

'I want you to go and talk to Ruby again. We need to make sure she's not going to run out on us. Also, ask her what she knows about a place called the Washington Hotel. And try these two names on her: Michael Chin and Alan Ho.'

'Who are they?'

'Relations of Louis Huu. They're tied up with the Washington Hotel. I'll explain later.'

'Okay. I'll get over to the Mandarin now.'

'Don't lose her,' Mayhew said. 'She's still the key for us.'

From her bath in the Taipan suite of the Mandarin Oriental Ruby had an uninterrupted view of the Golden Gate. But she was in no mood to savour it. The miniatures from the bar were lined up along the sides of the bath and Ruby was drinking them, one by one, and dropping the empty bottles into the foamy water.

She went through the deal once more in her mind. Buy fifteen units from Lucien at eleven, sell to Bertolli at thirteen and a half. Tell Eddie that Bertolli has cut a deal somewhere else, bad luck for us. Give me a clear profit of over a quarter of a million dollars. Enough to pay back Eddie and my other debts and margin for myself. Perfect deal.

She unscrewed the top off a miniature of Johnnie Walker, swallowed it, and dropped it in the bath.

Yesterday afternoon when she got back to the hotel she had rung Lucien's room, got no answer. When she checked with reception they told her he had checked out that morning. No, there was no message for her.

Not possible, she had shouted down the phone at the reception clerk.

I'm sorry, Miss Wen, the man had replied calmly. I made up his bill myself.

Ruby had slammed down the phone, her mind panicked and racing. Lucien was supposed to be waiting for her call. He was waiting for her deposit on fifteen units at one-ten.

Unless.

Unless he had someone follow her to the Hyatt, to her first meeting with John Bertolli. Unless he had set up a meeting himself, cutting her out of the deal.

Unless the stinking piece of dog vomit had sold his white powder to John Bertolli at ten thousand a kilo more than he had offered to her.

May all his family's property be ruined, now and forever! May his secret sack shrivel up like a dead slug and be eaten by turtles.

How could she have been so stupid?

She still had Keelan, her insurance. The prospect depressed her even more. What will you do, Ruby? Hide away in Ohio or New Mexico? Not a very fun life I don't think. Maybe this business is bad, but living in a trailer park is worse.

There was a knock at the door. She got out of the bath, staggering slightly, and tottered to the door, naked and dripping wet.

When she saw him Ruby wrapped her arms around him, and stood on tiptoe to hide her face in his neck. Her knee rubbed the inside of his thigh. 'John,' she murmured. 'Got to help me. Pliss.'

She was cold and wet and Keelan found she did not stir him at all. He pushed her away. There were damp patches all over his suit. 'Get some clothes on, Ruby.'

'Promise you don't let me down?'

A breathtaking demand. 'Get dressed,' he repeated.

She coiled her arm around his neck, the other hand went straight to his crotch. 'Need someone to love me,' she murmured.

Again, he pushed her away. The door to her room was still open and he kicked it shut. 'For Christ's sake,' he said. 'Do I look that stupid?'

Nice room, he thought as he followed Ruby inside. Lie, cheat, steal and sell drugs and you get a room overlooking the harbour. Work for the government and you get a view of another high-rise and pay for your own mini-bar.

Ruby slumped onto the sofa, and lit a cigarette. She was sulking. Bathwater formed a puddle on the carpet around her feet, and on the sofa cushions. Keelan went into the bathroom and got a towel. He tossed it to her, but she threw it back at him.

Her short black hair was plastered over her face, her tiny body shivered in the air conditioning.

'You'll get a cold,' he said. He was surprised to find that her naked body did not affect him at all. She just looked small and very sad, like a puppy pulled out of a creek.

The room smelled like a gin palace. 'You've been drinking, Ruby.'

'No shit.'

Keelan sat down. 'Got some questions I want to ask you.'

Ruby hugged herself with her arms, the cigarette trembling between her fingers.

'You sure you don't want to get dressed?' he asked her.

'Need a drink,' she said.

Keelan had seen Ruby in all her different guises, but never like this. An enigma inside an enigma. He must have been crazy to think she could become an asset to the agency. 'Ruby, do you know about a place called the Washington Hotel?'

'Why, you write a guidebook now, heya?'

'How about . . .' He checked the piece of paper in his pocket. 'How about Michael Chin and Alan Ho?'

'Michael Chin is Louis Huu's son-in-law, okay? Alan Ho . . . maybe his cousin. My contact here in Golden Mountain. This is how I get my powder.'

'And you sell it on to Bertolli?'

Ruby got up, staggered slightly, and made her way to the mini-bar, screwed off the top of another miniature and poured it into a glass. Her hand was shaking and the bottle clinked against the glass.

'Why doesn't Bertolli buy direct from Alan Ho?'

'Louis Huu only do business with other Chinese. Why he is never caught, heya. Don't trust *gwailos*.'

'Where do you make your pick-ups?'

'Wherever he say.'

'Could they be using the Washington as a warehouse?'

Ruby stared at him as if he was talking another language to her. 'Want a drink, John?'

'No, I don't.' He stood up. 'Ruby, can we still rely on you to testify?'

'Sure. Already tell you, okay. Do whatever you want.'

On an impulse Keelan walked across the room and threw open the doors to the wardrobe. Ruby's Louis Vuitton cases were inside, packed and ready.

'Christ.'

'Need a holiday, never mind. Will come back and testify for you. No shit. Whenever you say.'

Keelan wanted to shake her. His hands balled into fists at his sides and he wanted to rage, but he remembered all he had learned about face and instead he said, as calmly as he could: 'Going back to Hong Kong?'

'Live there, heya. Have to go back.'

Mayhew had been right, god damn it. The whole thing had been a waste of time. 'Know what I think, Ruby? I think you never even thought about giving this up. You were feeding us a few crumbs and hoping you could use us as insurance. You broke the wire deliberately. You were never once going to testify for us. Is that right?'

Ruby slumped against the wall. Her eyes were red, and who the hell knew, perhaps it was genuine. Her lower lip trembled. She looked beaten.

'Tell me something, Ruby. Did you utter one word of truth to me? Ever?'

'Tell you this for true, okay? I don't know. Say so much to so many people, can't remember what I tell you.'

'The money you owe Eddie, the gambling debt to the triads? That was all bullshit too?'

'Wish it was bullshit, okay.'

'I meant it, Ruby. We can protect you. I promise.'

'Think I'm crazy?'

'I think you're crazy if you don't do it. Where are you going to go? Back to Hong Kong? How many friends have you got there?'

'Eddie-ah will never hurt me.'

'You don't look so sure about that to me.'

Ruby looked up. 'Got to protect me. Has to.'

'How do you figure that?'

'Because he is my elder brother.'

'How loyal is a triad brother if you owe him money?'

Ruby shook her head. 'No, John. Don't understand. Eddie-ah is my real brother. His real name Wen Pui-yuen. We got the same blood, grow up in same little village called Shatin. Get away from that place together, he show me how.' She sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of one skinny arm. 'Love him like I never love anyone. No shit.'

86

Keelan's bedside phone in the Holiday Inn woke him from a black and numbing sleep at six-thirty the following morning. It was Mayhew.

'Meet me downstairs in half an hour,' he said. 'We've finally got some action.'

They arrived at the Washington just minutes after a team of detectives from the Narcotics Bureau. There was a SWAT team waiting outside as back-up. A fifty-year-old transvestite was exposing his silicone implants to the SWAT sergeant who was doing his best to ignore him. The rest of the crazies and winos who usually staked out their morning territory outside the Washington had disappeared.

'Let's do it,' Mayhew said.

The foyer of the Washington was cramped, drab and filthy, with peeling linoleum and a threadbare carpet. It reeked of mothballs and rising damp. There was a single elevator beside the stairs.

The staff, who were all Chinese, were in uproar. A lieutenant from Narcotics, still gripping the search and seizure warrant in his right fist, was restraining his own temper with difficulty under a torrent of abuse. Uniformed police hovered around him, ready to intervene.

Mayhew nodded to the lieutenant. 'How's it going?'

'If I can get this guy out of my face, I'll be fine.' The lieutenant was a big man, a college basketball player, and the top of the manager's head barely reached his shoulder. But the little Cantonese was not intimidated. 'Hey, don't poke,' the lieutenant said, brushing aside the other man's finger.

Another detective emerged from a corridor at the very rear

of the foyer. He nodded to the lieutenant. 'In the basement,' he said. 'In a safe. More than fifty units, I guess.'

The lieutenant grinned and pointed at the little Chinese. 'Arrest this mother's ass,' he said to one of the uniforms.

The little Chinese erupted with a string of Cantonese. The big black lieutenant shook his head. 'Wish I knew what the fuck he was saying.'

Keelan was pleased to realise he had picked up a few useful expressions during his six months in Hong Kong. 'He called you a mountain of dung,' Keelan said.

The lieutenant looked at Keelan, startled, then back at the Chinese manager. 'Well, I think you're a bag of shit, too, brother,' he shouted, and followed his detective down to the basement to inspect the haul.

Shekhou, China

Crossing the border at Lo Wu into China can be something of a disappointment. From the mountains and duck farms of the New Territories, the tourist passes through the barbed wire frontier that divides Hong Kong and China and could be forgiven for thinking that they had boarded the wrong train and were back in Kowloon. Blocks of high-rises compete with each other, as another, drabber, Hong Kong rises from the green hills.

Shenzhen is politically, but not economically, a part of China. It is one of the flagship cities of the Special Economic Zone, the People's flirtation with çapitalism. The real border to China is across the mountains, fifteen kilometres to the north.

The SEZ is not, as some say, completely lawless; money rules there. It is Hong Kong without the sophistication, the prosperity, and the restraint. The triads have found a warm bed to flourish, beyond the reach of British law in Hong Kong and the stern-faced men of Beijing. It is a nightmare vision of the future for those who plan to remain in Hong Kong, and a prompt for those who plan to leave.

Across Shenzhen Bay is Shekhou City, which is little more

than a sprawl of electronics factories and their dormitories. Because wages are lower labour is plentiful, and with a maximum tax rate of fifteen per cent many Hong Kong businessmen are now investing there, exporting through Hong Kong, air freighting their goods to the United States.

One of these far-sighted investors was Vincent Tse, with the consequence that Eddie Lau's syndicate now owned three factories in Shekhou City alone.

Eddie was conducted to Vincent's office by the Chinese manager. One of the staff brought them a pot of jasmine tea, and then the manager bowed out of the door, closing it gently behind him.

Eddie sprawled in a chair on the other side of Vincent's desk. He looked at the trays of paperwork, the abacus and electronic calculator and computer terminals, and wondered why Vincent did not go mad with it all. 'How is business?' he said.

'Business is okay. We are making almost as much here as we are with our *pin un* – our illegal businesses – in Hong Kong, and for much less risk.'

'So why do you look so serious this morning?'

'Because right now we need some cash,' Vincent added. 'Our little adventure in Thailand cost us over one million US. The short-term loans we raised are now due, and we have another shipment from Louis Huu to pay for.'

'Perhaps I can help you balance your books,' Eddie said.

'More white powder?'

He shook his head. 'Going to hit the biggest gold shop in Wanchai. It is all arranged.'

Vincent did not try to hide his dismay. 'Don't need to do this no more. With the credit cards, the white powder, soon we can make enough to be legitimate.'

Eddie shook his head. 'Don't want to be legitimate. Don't care about all these numbers in a book! Want respect, Ah Lam! This!' He slammed his fist on the desk top. 'This is how I live!'

The tea had spilled. Vincent stood up and fussed over it, mopping the spill on his papers with a silk hankerchief. They

had had this argument before. Why was Eddie so afraid to be rich, to be safe from risk? 'Don't have to do this no more, Eddie-ah. You can be the big boss, let your man Democracy Tang take the risks for you.'

'You don't use a muscle, it gets soft and flabby. I do not plan to get soft and flabby. Like Timothy Man. Like The Ox.'

Vincent walked around the desk, put a hand on Eddie's shoulder. 'Love you too much, Eddie-ah,' he whispered. 'If you die, if they put you in the register, I would rather they break all my bones, one by one. It will not hurt so much.'

Eddie pushed his hand away.

'If not for Ruby Wen, you don't have to do this. She costs us one million to Louis Huu! How does she show her gratitude? She cheats us another forty thousand from our profit! How long are you going to let her do this to us, Eddie-ah?'

'Very tired of you talking about Ruby Wen all the time.'

'Very tired of her taking all our money.'

'Ruby Wen is my problem.'

'Then when will you make this problem go away?'

Eddie stood up and went to the door. 'You look after the accounts. I shall look after our business.'

Vincent picked up a calculator from the desk and threw it at the wall, narrowly missing Eddie's head. 'That is all I am to you! A calculator!'

'You don't understand about Ruby-ah,' Eddie said, calmly. 'I will take care of her my own way.'

He went out, closing the door behind him.

87

San Francisco

The office of the United States Assistant District Attorney was on the sixteenth floor of the Federal Building. It was a large office, crammed with government issue furniture and sombre grey metal filing cabinets, looking out onto Golden Gate Avenue and a rundown commercial building just across the street.

The assistant DA was a stocky Bostonian and former Notre Dame quarterback by the name of Dave Browne. The top of his desk had been cleared of its usual clutter, leaving just the blotter, a jade pen stand, and a framed colour photograph of his wife and children. The wall behind him was covered with framed citations and photographs of Browne with his political masters from across the spectrum.

There were two brown manila files side by side on the green blotter.

Keelan and Mayhew had not expected anyone else to be at the meeting but when they arrived there was another man lounging in a chair on the other side of Browne's desk. Keelan guessed his age at around sixty. He had grey, short-cropped hair, and was wearing a blue Lacoste sports shirt and fawn slacks. He had the sort of tan you only acquired from spending a lot of time under a sun lamp.

'John, Bill, this is Gerry Gates,' Browne said.

Gates rose and shook their hands. 'Pleased to know you.' He looked like anyone's pleasant golf-playing grandfather, Keelan thought, retired in Fort Lauderdale. Except for the eyes.

'Gerry's just down from Langley in Virginia,' Browne said, immediately defining the parameters of their discussion.

'Right.'

Browne organised coffees and reviewed the files on the desk in front of him while the two DEA agents toyed with their cups. Gates made no attempt at polite conversation and Keelan felt a growing tension in the room. He wondered what interest the CIA could have in this particular case. He had a feeling this meeting was not going to end well.

Browne leaned back in his leather executive chair, his hands behind his head. 'I don't know,' he said.

'You don't know what, Dave?' Mayhew said, a note of irritation in his voice.

'Let's see what we got here. First of all, our Mister Bertolli.' He picked up the Bertolli file. It was two inches thick. 'So far you have what we call a No Dope Historical. You are going to ask a court for a conviction on the basis of an unreliable witness, and you have no powder on the table to impress a jury of twelve good men and true. I cannot recommend a prosecution on this basis.'

Keelan felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. 'Our informant can detail conspiracy to import narcotics into this country going back five years.'

'Oh yeah, ROSE,' Browne said, using the codename the agency had designated for Ruby.

'She's willing to testify in front of a Grand Jury,' Keelan said.

Browne did not seem impressed. 'I see from her file that she escaped from Thailand while on bail facing a charge of possession of seven kilograms of heroin. At the time she was not registered as a confidential informant of your agency. A good defence attorney would have a field day here.' He chewed his bottom lip. 'You do still have ROSE?'

Keelan took a deep breath. 'ROSE is an unknown quantity at the moment.' He still hoped he had managed to change her mind about going back to Hong Kong before he left her the previous evening.

Browne closed the file. 'Unless you have some powder on the table or some transcripts for me, forget it. Sorry.'

Keelan closed his eyes. No. He can't get away from me again.

'Mister Huu,' Browne went on. He pulled another heavy file towards him. 'We got a few hundred hours of taped phone conversations acquired by your Bangkok office, all conducted in *chiu chao* dialect. Even with the aid of your transcripts there is a heavy preponderance of slang and code words, so you would have to submit to a judge for a local agent to make an interpretation of what is being said. There is a precedent for this, in the Howard Marks case, but it could be challenged by a good defence attorney. The real problem here is that the host country's narcotics bureau appears to have lost the masters of the tapes, so the cassette copies we possess could be challenged and ruled inadmissible.'

'Now the good news,' Mayhew said.

'I've not finished with the bad news yet. Mister Louis Huu is a national of a foreign and friendly country and without these tapes and the evidence of your Bangkok agents we cannot prove he has conspired against the laws and interests of the United States of America.' Browne leaned forward. 'However, I see from your report that you have had a twenty four hour surveillance on Mister Huu since his arrival in the city and this has yielded some results.'

'He's been staying at a house in Daly City,' Mayhew said. 'We did some checking. The house was purchased two and a half years ago, in the name of . . .' Mayhew consulted his file, '. . . Michael Chin Kok-yen. Yesterday one of my men followed a black Mercedes 500 SEL, registered in that name, to a hotel in the Tenderloin called the Washington. This hotel is registered to another Chinese, Alan Ho Peng-fei. Our CI has informed us that Michael Chin is Louis Huu's son-in law, and Alan Ho is his cousin. This led us to suspect that the premises were being used as a warehouse for Huu's narcotic shipments.'

'You executed a search and seizure warrant?'

'We confiscated forty kilos of Double U-O Globe heroin, ninety eight per cent pure, worth seven hundred million dollars on the street. We have questioned several CAAC crews who were staying at the hotel and four of them have admitted bringing in parcels in their luggage. These parcels are either delivered to them in Hong Kong or inside China

itself. We suspect, but cannot prove, that the heroin is being refined inside Kachin Burma or Yunnan and smuggled across China, along the old silk routes, with the collusion of the People's Liberation Army. We maintain that this trade is organised and financed by the Huu family.'

Gates spoke for the first time. 'Mister Huu and his family has not yet been detained?'

'Not yet.'

Browne seemed nervous. He cleared his throat. 'I was discussing this case with Mister Gates, just before you got here, and it seems we have a problem. He was explaining to me that even if we had solid evidence against this man it may not be possible to prosecute our case.'

Mayhew shook his head. 'Excuse me?'

Keelan stared at Gates. 'Where's the problem? This son of a bitch is a major drug dealer.'

Gates shifted in his chair, making himself more comfortable. He put his hands behind his head, imitating Browne. 'This is a confidential discussion?'

'Of course,' Browne said.

Mayhew nodded.

Gates turned to the two DEA employees, focusing on them all the intensity of his clear blue eyes. 'I understand you both have distinguished service records with the DEA so I know that this must cause you a great deal of consternation. But, you see, there is a bigger picture here.'

A bigger picture.

'Mister Huu is a problem, I admit.'

'A problem,' Keelan repeated, deadpan.

'I must admit I am shocked by your revelations, as I happen to know this gentleman personally. Let me draw a parallel for you. You people use so-called confidential informants who are often, let's say, not exactly squeaky clean, right? The Agency works the same way. We have to swim in muddy waters and some of the foreign nationals in our employ are not the sort of people you or I might choose to have over for dinner. You see what I'm saying?'

When Keelan and Mayhew did not respond, he said: 'I take it you both know your history?'

'A little,' Keelan said.

'You remember the Sicily landings?'

'Not personally. My father would. He was in them.'

'Well, perhaps he – and by logical extension, you – would not be here now if it were not for a fellow called Charles Luciano. Commonly known as Lucky. He was serving a prison term at the time but because of his connections in Sicily the landings in Italy went far better than planned, saved considerable loss of life. But as you are no doubt aware, Luciano was also a racketeer and a drug smuggler. Sometimes the lines between what is right and what is possible become a little grey, a little blurred. I think that may be the case with Mr Huu.'

'He's going to help you invade Sicily?' Keelan said.

'Very cute,' Gates said, but now he wasn't smiling. 'The fact is, Mister Huu has some well established contacts inside China, especially with gentlemen in the military. There are some highly placed personnel in the PLA who profit from transporting some of Mister Huu's goods across Yunnan and into Canton province and the SEZ. However, that is not the only way they enrich themselves.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning we obtain a great deal of very important intelligence along this same pipeline. Mister Huu uses his contacts inside China to help us buy military and political information. The narcotics and the intelligence come out together.'

'In other words, he's buying protection.'

'That's a little crude, and also a little inaccurate.'

'It sounds very accurate to me.'

'We have to weigh our country's security against an internal social problem. The intelligence that has been coming our way through this pipeline is too important to be compromised. I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I think we have to leave this one alone.'

'We just let them continue?' Keelan said.

'I understand you have arrested the hotel manager at the Washington and it would seem that some of these Chinese air crews have been trying to enrich themselves by importing restricted substances. I would expect you to prosecute these

cases to the fullest extent of the law. But we don't need to go any further than that. I think if Mister Huu and his family were to be harassed in any way, my superiors might have to contemplate stepping in at a higher level.'

Keelan stared at Mayhew, then back at Gates. 'Well, you guys appear to have this worked out.'

Browne looked stricken. 'I don't like this any more than you do. But we're grown ups. This isn't Camelot.'

'Not even close.'

'I'm sorry, John,' Browne said. 'I know how hard you worked on this one.'

'Shove it up your ass,' Keelan said, and walked out.

Mayhew and Keelan drove to the Mandarin Oriental. Two of Mayhew's men had been posted in the lobby. They confirmed that Ruby Wen had not tried to check out of her room, had not even appeared downstairs since the previous evening.

The two men took the elevator to her room, and knocked on her door. There was no reply. Finally Keelan went downstairs to find the service manager, who opened the door with a master key. Her cases were still there, but Ruby Wen was not.

In fact Ruby Wen was already in Hong Kong. The previous afternoon she had left the hotel through a service door and taken a taxi to the airport. She paid cash for a China Airlines flight to Hong Kong using the forged Malaysian passport that Eddie Lau had provided for her.

Back in San Francisco Keelan went back to his room at the Holiday Inn with Mayhew and the two men got very drunk.

They had lost Louis Huu. Now, without Ruby Wen, John Bertolli was off the hook as well.

88

Mirs Bay

The speedboat had six two-hundred-and-seventy-five horse-power Mercuries on the back, a bullet-proof glass windshield, armour reinforced bows for ramming and a mounted Browning fifty-calibre machine gun. It could travel at speeds over eighty miles per hour and was faster than anything the British navy or the Hong Kong Marine Police had at their disposal.

Eddie Lau studied his three recruits; Benny Cheong, barely out of his teens, a blue lantern from Shekhou City; Paul Tam, even younger than Benny, a good-looking boy with the tattoo of a snake coiled around his left wrist; and Tang Kam-chuen, Democracy Tang, almost as old as Eddie himself, a former PLA corporal who boasted he had killed five students with a sidearm at Tiananmen. Hence his nickname.

The journey from Mirs Bay to the deserted beach at Ko Tong Hao took just fifteen minutes. As the boat drew into the shallows Eddie saw half a dozen men waiting beside a truck on the dirt road above the beach. As he and his three *mah jais* jumped from the boat the men splashed into the water, large cardboard boxes balanced on their shoulders, and began loading them into the lighter. The packaging identified the contents as new Hitachi fifty-four centimetre televisions. Each one would fetch a hundred dollars profit inside China and the speedboat could accommodate two hundred boxes. Within half an hour the boat would be making its way back up the channel for the run across Mirs Bay back to the SEZ.

Eddie led his three men off the beach. A Mercedes was waiting for them behind the truck. They climbed in and set off through the New Territories for the city. On the way they checked their weapons. They had brought with them

four Chinese-made pistols, a dozen clips of 7.62 ammunition, twenty-five rounds in each, and an ex-PLA hand grenade.

Not enough for a small war. But more than enough for Hennessey Road on a Wednesday afternoon.

But first Eddie had some personal business to attend to.

San Francisco

John Keelan started the day with a miniature from the bar fridge. It was a symptom of his anger and self-pity, he decided, rather than an escape from his misery. He had tried to develop a self-destructive habit with cigarettes and alcohol, but he had never really succeeded. It had been a game with him. He was too disciplined to ever really lose control.

And yet this morning, two years after the single one terrible moment around which his life now turned, he felt closer to despair than he had ever done. If they had nailed Bertolli, there would have been some symmetry, some justice, and yes, a sense of revenge. Then everything that had happened to him would have been been for a reason; and even if there was no God, then life at least had some in-built checks and balances. But Bertolli was still out there, still dealing and still rich and powerful, a private source of anguish that could never leave him, until honour and justice were satisfied.

Keelan turned on the CNN news, stared at it blankly, his mind elsewhere. He was jarred from his private reflections by a featured report on the activities of triad gangs in Shenzhen, who were using the special economic zones to smuggle luxury imported goods into China, realising vast profits. The reporter noted with heavy irony how China's flirtation with capitalism was taking corruption out of the hands of the cadres and putting it back into the hands of free enterprise.

'Where it belongs,' Keelan muttered bitterly.

He reached for the remote control and flicked it off. Christ Almighty. What a world.

Perhaps it was time for someone to take the cause of justice into their own hands.

89

Hong Kong

Ruby took a taxi straight from the airport, changed in her apartment, and rode the escalator down the Mid-levels to Staunton Road. In her bag she had a copy of the T'ung Shu, the ancient necromancer's manual that was supposed to bring the bearer good luck simply by its possession. As she crossed Shelley Street she was nearly hit by a goods van, she felt its slipstream on her clothes, and she knew that this too meant good luck, for the bad luck dragon that had followed her even to the Golden Mountain must surely have been crushed now by the onrushing wheels.

She turned down an alleyway next to a gloomy little house selling funeral decorations. There was a kiosk belonging to a cobbler and a key cutter, and next door a crumbling three-storey house with a wooden balcony and elaborate dragons carved around the doors. The gambling house was on the second floor.

She climbed two flights of stairs to a landing. An untidy youth in a white singlet, his arms covered with snarling blue dragons, was sitting on an orange box. He recognised her and threw open the bolted steel door.

The room was thick and pungent with cigarette smoke. There were no windows, the only light came from a single light bulb. Strips of green cloth had been nailed to wooden planks as gaming boards.

A game of fan tan was in progress. A girl in a slightly grubby satin cheongsam stood behind the table, a white painted wooden box in front of her. Diagonal lines divided the box into four sections.

A dozen men were crowded around, hawkers in soiled

white undershirts and long khaki shorts, a businessman in a sharkskin suit and an expensive Rolex wristwatch. They did not even look up at her, their attention totally focused on the game.

There was a mound of green buttons in a pile in the centre of the table. Piles of one, two and five-hundred-dollar bills were thrown onto the numbered sections inside the boxes, the players gambling on how many counters would be left over when the buttons had been evenly divided.

Ruby placed a piece of raw ginger beside her lucky number, two, and slapped down five five-hundred-dollar notes. Her mouth was dry, and the palms of her hands were suddenly cold and greasy. She could hear her blood banging in her head, feel her chest tighten, making it hard to breathe. She had to know if her luck was good.

The croupier scooped up a pile of the buttons with a stainless steel dish and began to expertly divide the buttons into lines of four with a flat wooden stick . . .

It was the day of all days. She had the god of luck standing at her side. She experienced the same exhilaration, the same omnipotence she had experienced that afternoon in Maha Chai. She kept her concentration focused on the baize and the green buttons, played until she was exhausted and beyond. Finally a man in a dark suit appeared at her elbow and told her to go home. The Sun Yee On did not keep gambling houses so they could lose money.

She found a taxi on Hollywood Road. She knew now her luck had changed. Everything was going to be all right.

It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when Ruby got back to her apartment. She walked into the bedroom and took handfuls of banknotes from her purse and scattered them on the bed, like used paper tissues. Over one hundred and twenty thousand Hong Kong dollars!

Fatigue hit her in a wave. Have to sleep, heya! But first a shower. The grime of the airport and the city was all over her, the gambler's scent of sweat and tobacco smoke had soaked

into her skin. She stripped off her clothes and climbed into the shower.

The water was as hot as she could tolerate it. Her skin turned pink. She leaned against the cold tiles, letting the water massage her back and her scalp.

Now she was back in Hong Kong she would be lucky again.

She turned off the shower and towelled her body dry and then her hair. She found the brush on the marble vanity and cleared the condensation off the mirror with a towel.

She screamed.

Eddie Lau was wearing a pearl-grey tailored jacket over a white linen shirt, buttoned to the neck, no tie. The charcoal pin-stripe trousers had a leather Pierre Cardin belt with a gold buckle. His hair was perfect. Rayban sunglasses hid his eyes.

He was leaning on the door jamb.

'I scare you, Ruby-ah?'

'How long you been there, heya?'

He did not answer her. He let his eyes wander over her body. 'You put on a couple of pounds in America. Too much hamburger.'

Ruby made no attempt to cover herself. She put her hands either side of her on the vanity. 'You miss me?'

He did not answer her. Ruby sensed something was wrong. 'Why do you steal all my money?' His hand snaked out. She flinched away. But instead of striking her, Eddie's fingers caressed her cheek.

'If I steal your money, why will I come back to you?'

'Because you got nowhere else to run, Ruby-ah.' He slapped her, not hard, almost delicately.

'Hit me, okay, never mind. Pull my hair.'

'Don't want to hurt you, Ruby-ah. Can never hurt you, little flower.'

She was crying now.

'What do I do with you, Ruby-ah? Such a bad girl. Father always says you are a bad girl.'

'Make it up to you, okay?'

'I buy you nice apartment, nice car. I pay your debts for you, you take the money and you gamble again. Then I pay one million US to save your life in Bangkok. Everything I do for you, what respect I get for this. You steal another three hundred thousand.' He sighed, like a teacher with a recalcitrant pupil.

'Don't hurt me, okay. Get lucky now. Everything different now, you see.'

'Ruby-ah,' he whispered. 'You got more lies than a cloud got rain.'

'So sorry, okay. I am just a mountain of turtle dung, I know. But I still love you too much, Eddie-ah.'

'Cannot help you no more, little flower. Sorry for you, but cannot help you no more.'

'You don't mean that. Always love your Ruby-ah.'

Eddie stood in front of her, looking beyond her, admiring his own reflection in the glass. She fell onto her knees and unzipped his trousers. He was hard for her. Another lucky sign. She took him in her mouth.

'Little sister,' he groaned.

You are such a big piece of turtle snot, she thought. Think you're such a big guy. Underneath you still love me too much. Make you do anything I want once I got you between my legs. Disgusting the way you snivel over that Vincent.

Eddie picked her up under the arms, turned her around and pushed her against the wall mirror. She guided him inside her, arched her back, flattening her breasts against the cold glass. Ruby Wen won again, she thought. On the very last bet.

Like always.

She climaxed quickly, still aroused from her winnings at fan tan. He carried her to the bed, laid her on her back and entered her again. But with the Clouds and the Rain, the jet-lag and the tension of the last week draining out of her she was only dimly conscious of Eddie's own gasping moment with the gods. And then she slept.

90

Little Italy, San Francisco

When Keelan appeared in the doorway of Mama Fulvia's he was immediately recognised. Two men in dark suits who had been sitting by the window stood up and blocked his path. Bertolli, at his table near the back of the restaurant looked surprised.

Then he grinned. 'It's okay, boys. I know this guy. Hey, John, come and sit down.'

Keelan sat in the banquette opposite Bertolli, who had a napkin tucked into his collar and was demolishing a plate of potato gnocchi.

'Vito, you remember this guy? John Keelan? John, this is Vito Trappatoni. Good friend of mine.'

The other man held out his hand. Keelan ignored it. 'This is private,' he said to Bertolli.

Bertolli's smile faded. He worked the inside of his cheek with his tongue, thinking about this insult. Trappatoni would have been just as happy to reach across the table and smash Keelan in the face with his fist. But finally Bertolli nodded to his lieutenant. 'We'll talk later.'

With a scowl in Keelan's direction, Trappatoni got up and went to another table.

'I give you some leeway here,' Bertolli said. 'Don't abuse it.'

'Don't tell me what to do, you little punk.'

Bertolli sipped some red wine. 'This is what I mean, John. You got a lousy temper. If you were a reasonable man you could have had a nice life. But that temper of yours. Want some *vino tinto*? Help you mellow out a little.'

'That won't be necessary.'

Keelan felt eyes on them all over the restaurant. Mama Fulvia, the waiters, Trappatoni, the two goons by the door.

'I'm getting tired of this, John. What is it you want?'

'Just this.' The revolver seemed to appear in his hand by magic, the barrel between Bertolli's eyes. Keelan felt chairs being pushed back all around the room, but Bertolli put up his hand and then there was silence. Nobody moved.

He heard a woman moaning.

Bertolli's mama.

Several patrons rushed for the door, the women screaming. Others just sat there, paralysed by fear and surprise.

Keelan removed the safety.

'Aren't you forgetting something, John? You're a cop.'

'They transferred me to garbage disposal.'

Bertolli's face was ashen. But his eyes were still calculating. 'Not loaded, right?' His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat.

'A full chamber of thirty-eight hollow points. Enough to spread your head all over Broadway.'

'Okay, then.' He raised his hands above the table. 'Do it.'

Despite himself, Keelan had to admire his balls. Bertolli was afraid, sure. But he wasn't going to beg. If that was what Keelan had come for, he was going to make sure he didn't get that part of it.

'Let's get it over with, John.'

Keelan felt his finger freeze on the trigger.

Bertolli shook his head. 'Hey, I ain't got all day. If we're going to do this thing, let's get it done.'

Keelan thought about Anna, about little Caroline. He deserves this. He deserves to die. But Bertolli was right, he couldn't do it. Other men gunned down men, women and children in cold blood. The world did not have a shortfall of cold-blooded killers. But John Keelan wasn't one of them. That was what made him different.

He lowered the gun.

'Believe it or not,' Bertolli said, 'I respect you for that.'

Keelan dashed the wine in his face and then hit him across the bridge of the nose with the barrel of the revolver.

Immediately Trappatoni and the muscle at the door were on their feet, reaching for their own weapons. But Keelan

was standing in front of Bertolli, and they hesitated, knowing they could not him without hitting their boss.

Bertolli had a linen napkin held to his face. Hard to tell what was blood and what was red wine. His nose was crushed and bent. 'Leave it!' he honked at Trappatoni, at the men at the door. 'Just fucking leave it, you idiots!'

Keelan saw Trappatoni nod to the two goons, who took their hands away from their jackets.

Keelan holstered his weapon. 'See ya, John.'

'Get the fuck out of here. You're finished, Keelan. I'll have your ass.'

'Pity about that nice Roman nose,' Keelan said. He walked out into the sunshine. To hell with it. He didn't want the job any more anyway.

Mid-levels, Hong Kong

She did not know how long she had been asleep. When she woke the curtains were still open and the night outside was black. A bedside lamp threw a dim yellow light over the room. She was on her back with her arms above her head; she tried to sit up, but couldn't move. She twisted her head; her wrists were tied to the gilt frame of the bed with her Hermès scarf.

Eddie stood over her, his face thrown in shadow by the lamp. 'You lied to me, Ruby-ah.'

Ruby shook her head. Fear paralysed her muscles. She couldn't breathe, her chest felt as if there was a crushing weight on top of it. She tugged at the scarf but it held her tight.

When she turned back Eddie was holding a knife. 'Vincent says you lose my money at fan tan and paigow.'

The razor-sharp blade of the knife was inches from her face. The steel had a blue tinge; it caught the light of the lamp and hurt her eyes. She turned away. By all gods great and small. Would never hurt me. Not bad. Not his Ruby-ah. 'Cannot hurt me, please!'

'Want to bet your life, Ruby-ah?'

It was as if there was a block of ice in her belly.

'I give you money to pay off Peter Mui. When you are in jail in Thailand I pay thirty-one million baht! One million American! For you! And how do you repay me, fucking your mother! You steal my money to gamble. I tell you not to gamble so big, but you do not listen to me.'

'Please, Eddie.'

He held his fist in front of her face, slowly opened the fingers. There was a single bone dice in his palm.

'Lose big face because of you. So now I have to teach you a lesson. You want to gamble, we can gamble now. Maybe the biggest gamble of your whole life.' He sat astride her legs, so that she could not move. 'What is your lucky number, Ruby-ah?'

'Please, Eddie. Do anything for you. Love you too much, no shit.'

'Think I'm stupid, fucking your mother?' he shouted, his face twisted with rage. He held the knife against her throat, she felt the point against the soft skin of her neck, biting . . . 'Tell me your lucky number!'

'Two.'

'Two, okay. Now I will tell you about this game. We will play some dice. You get your lucky number two, I help you this last time, forget about your debt. You get number four, the death number, I put a gag in your mouth, expose your bones to the light, leave you here tied to the bed.'

'Please Eddie . . .'

'What is the matter, little flower? You like to gamble, neh? Does it make life interesting for you, make you feel alive? Is that what you want, Ruby-ah? Like to feel the blood in your veins?'

'Stop now, Eddie.'

'Cannot stop now. This game is much too interesting.'

'Eddie . . .'

'Think I will not wash my own sister? That is a big gamble, Ruby-ah. A very big gamble.'

The knife was hurting her. It was hard to breathe. Her limbs started to shake, uncontrollably.

He was going to kill her.

He kept his eyes on her, but with his other hand he rolled the dice across her belly. Ruby's body jerked as she twisted to see what the dice had decreed for her.

Eddie shook his head, frowned. 'First it is a six, then you move and make it a four. What can we do, Ruby-ah? I have to make it fair, so I will take the first number. A good casino never cheats its best customer, okay?'

Ruby was too frightened to talk. Kill you, kill you, kill you one day, Eddie!

He rolled again. She dared not move, kept her eyes shut tight, not breathing. She felt the light touch of the dice on her stomach, then the hard callouses of Eddie's hands on her skin. 'This time a three.'

She heard crying. She realised it was her.

'Four.'

She jerked her head up. The dice lay on her belly. A six.

Eddie was smiling. 'Not paying attention, Ruby-ah. Got to look, got to watch me. Otherwise this is not a very fun game, okay.'

He grabbed her hair, forced her to watch. She held her breath. He rolled the dice across her stomach, and it nestled between the two hard bands of her stomach muscles.

A four.

Ruby took a long gasping breath. A four . . .

'Please, Eddie . . .'

Eddie was laughing. He raised the knife.

91

Bangkok

It was not a clean, life-giving rain. The Bangkok monsoon was fouled with the smut that was in the air, smearing its dark filth across the windscreen. Lucien had to drive cautiously, the Mercedes threatening to aquaplane on the flooded roads. When he reached his mother's villa in Asoke, he ran the few yards from the car to the verandah but even in those few steps his white suit was soaked through.

He heard Piaf's plaintive voice on his mother's sound system: 'La Vie en Rose'. Even restored on a compact disc, her voice sounded scratchy and faint, as if the producers had endeavoured to capture the essence of an ancient 78.

His mother was sitting on the terrace, drinking pastis, watching the huge drops of rain splash onto the banana leaves. Her pet, Coco, played and chattered at the other end of the terrace. The background of vegetation was a livid, emerald green. The only other colour in the garden was the spirit house, where the bungalow's guardian spirit had been recently placated with offerings of fresh flowers and fruit.

Noelle looked older than he had seen her in a very long time. There were lines around her eyes that he had never noticed before.

'Lucien. What a pleasant surprise.' She did not smile.

'*Maman*,' he said and kissed her.

'I have not seen you for so long.'

'I have been very busy.'

'How was America?'

He sat down beside her. She signalled to her boyesse who hurried off to fetch the young *monsieur* a pastis. 'Everywhere you go they wish you a nice day. It drives you crazy.'

'And your business went well?' she asked him, the word 'business' spoken with distaste.

'Yes. Business was good.'

'That is good. It is good that you are happy.' A beat while the boyesse placed a drink at his elbow. Ever since he had decided to stay on in Thailand there had a barrier between them. Just being with her reminded him of his betrayal of her, and so he visited less and less.

'You don't come and see me so much now,' she said, reading his thoughts.

'I come whenever I can.'

She reached out, touched his hand. Almost as if she was checking it to see that it was still warm, he thought. 'It is your birthday the day after tomorrow. You must come. I will have Noi cook us a special dinner.'

'I cannot, *maman*. I have to catch an evening flight.'

'But you have just returned from America.'

'I have to go to France. I hope to get a contract to export the ski jackets we have been making in our factory in Chinatown.' It was an idea he had stolen from Ruby Wen. He now hoped to conceal hugh grade narcotics in the lining of export textiles for transport to his father's old contacts in the *milieu* in Marseille.

'Perhaps then we can have lunch at the Oriental before you leave.'

'Yes. Why not?'

She stared at him. There was an expression on her face he had not seen before. 'You hate me, don't you?' she said.

'Of course not, *maman*! Why do you say such things? Extraordinary.'

'I can tell when I look in your eyes. You hate me because I tried to keep you from your father all these years. It was wrong.'

Lucien did not know what to say. Yes, he did hate her for that.

'Please, Lucien, can we be friends?' Noelle said. She looked suddenly broken and defeated. 'I do not approve of how you live now. I never can approve of this. I have tried all my life to stop you getting involved with . . . him.

But now I cannot stand to be apart from you. You are all I have.'

He squeezed her hand. She was getting old, he realised. There was a frailty, a vulnerability, in her he had never seen before. 'It's all right,' he said.

'You have to understand I only want what is best for you.'

'I know.'

Her eyes pleaded with him. 'Please,' she whispered. 'I will ask you just one last time. Please, when you go back to France, stay there. Get away from him.'

He shook his head. '*Papa* will not be around much longer to corrupt me.'

'That is not what I mean,' she said. But she read what was in his eyes, and she sighed. 'I only ever did what I thought was best for you. You understand that?'

'I know, *maman*. But I am still my father's son.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, you are.' And with that final admission she looked unutterably sad.

When Lucien arrived Baptiste was sitting on the balcony outside his bedroom. In the grey light of the evening, his face was the colour of ash. The flesh had fallen off him. Every day he looked a little more wasted.

He was smoking a cigarette.

For the two men the last few months had been a whirlwind of engagements, lunches at the Oriental or the Alliance Française, entertaining *chiu chao* businessmen, Thai politicians and army colonels in Baptiste's nightclubs and restaurants. The effort had exhausted Lucien. For Baptiste, it had accelerated his decline.

'You see your *maman*?' Baptiste said.

'An hour ago,' Lucien said.

'How is she?'

'She never changes.'

'You told her I am dying?'

'You are not dying, papa.'

'Of course I am dying! Please do not try and cheer me up. You are just like that doctor. He never gives me a straight answer. I ask him how long I have, he says: "Perhaps you

will live longer than me." Yes, if I shoot him in the head right now! *Cul de vache!*'

He lit another cigarette. Lucien heard him wheezing from the other side of the room.

'I wish I had more time to teach you what you need to know. We have wasted so much time.'

'I can handle everything now, papa.'

Baptiste did not seem to hear him. 'If you had spent the last ten years with me,' he said, 'I could have given you so much. You are not hard, Lucien. That is your trouble.'

Lucien thought about his most recent coup in San Francisco. He wondered if Ruby still thought he was too soft, too green. He smiled at that memory.

Baptiste reached for the little flask on the rattan table at his side. It contained liquid morphine to ease the pain. What rich irony, Lucien thought.

'So now my addiction is going to kill me,' Baptiste said. 'That is what I am, *hein*? An addict. But no one calls the tobacco company murderers. They put all this shit in their cigarettes and they have big hoardings all over every city in Asia to advertise what they sell. But for them, it is okay. I peddle a little opium and I am a pariah to my wife.' He drew on the tobacco, studied the cigarette as it burned. He coughed, a wet, hacking sound deep in his chest. 'What good do these things do, *hein*? You think the people who make this shit smoke it?'

He looked around at his son. Baptiste's one good eye had sunken in his face, the socket now veiled with dark shadows, the shadows of death.

'You know, Luc, when I look back on my life, the best time of everything is when I am flying, when I am young, when the future is never too sure. I take a lot of risks then. But for the last twenty years there are no more devils to shout at, no more enemies I can spit in the eye. You are lucky. Now it is your turn. When I take over this business from your grandfather, everyone say about me: he is too soft, he is too raw. But you are like me. You learn fast. I look into your eyes Lucien and I see myself.'

'Do you regret anything, papa?'

'I only have one regret, and that is your *maman*. I do some very stupid things in my life but the most stupid is the way I lose Noelle. I love her with such passion, something I never feel for any other woman in my whole life.' He stubbed out his cigarette. 'Will you do one thing for me, Luc?'

'If I can.'

'Ask her to come and see me. Just once. Please. I just want to see my lovely Noelle just one more time before I die.'

92

Hong Kong

Ruby could not take her eyes from the knife.

This stinking life. Never meant for it to happen this way. Just wanted to have a fun life, a few nice things, make some babies, be a good girl. Not my fault that I never have any good luck.

The knife arced down, slashed through the silk scarf, embedded itself into the soft pillow.

'You are right, Ruby-ah,' Eddie whispered. 'Can never hurt my little flower. I promise our father I will take good care of you. Even though you are a thieving, scaley whore.'

The only sound a soft, endless moan from deep in Ruby's chest.

'Cannot help you again, Ruby-ah. Got to be able to trust you. You understand?'

She nodded her head.

Eddie stood up. Ruby leaped from the bed, rushed into the bathroom, and vomited. She thought she was going to faint. She lay down on the cold tiles, exhausted, gasping for her breath.

When she opened her eyes Eddie was standing over her. 'Goodbye little flower,' he said. 'Cannot help you no more.'

93

Wanchai

The four young Chinese men who entered the jewellery store on Hennessey Road just after ten o'clock that morning could have been mistaken for business executives on a shopping spree. They strolled along the counters, their hands in their pockets, sometimes stopping in front of a display case to examine a necklace or ring or wristwatch.

The turbaned Sikh guard who was standing at the doorway with a shotgun ignored them.

Without warning, one of the four men produced an object from his jacket pocket and screamed a warning in Cantonese. The guard wheeled around, bringing up his shotgun, then froze when he saw that one of the men was holding a hand grenade.

The other three produced Black Star pistols from inside their jackets. One of them ran towards the guard, the pistol aimed at his face, screaming at him to drop the shotgun. The Sikh, eyes still on the grenade, obeyed. The half-dozen tourists, unlucky enough to be in the store at this moment, were frozen with horror and disbelief. A woman started to scream.

The two remaining Chinese ran through the store, pushing customers and salespeople on to their faces on the floor, then began smashing the glass display cases with the butts of their pistols. One of them produced a large mail sack that had been carefully folded and stuffed into the back of his trousers under his jacket. The other man threw in fistfuls of gold and jewellery.

On the street dozens of people were witness to the events taking place inside. There was the low, deadly murmur of

panic. Car horns blared as some drivers stopped for a better view.

At that moment two uniformed policemen turned the corner of Hennessey and Marsh and saw the disturbance. They ran across the street, pulling their .38 Smith and Wesson revolvers from the leather holsters on their hips. They approached the store slowly, their backs against the window of the jeans shop next door, their weapons held in a two-handed grip, safety off. The first patrolman saw the man holding the grenade and hesitated. His partner spoke urgently into his hand-held radio, made his situation report and asked for urgent back-up.

The four men had finished what they came for. One of them, his wrist bleeding from where he had torn it on the jagged glass of the display case, ran for the door. Another picked up the guard's shotgun and followed him.

The two policemen knew they had already lost whatever advantage they had. They ran to block the exit, aiming their weapons at the gunmen. The man holding the shotgun saw them. Without hesitation he brought the weapon to his hip and fired both barrels at the glass window.

The whole glass frontage exploded. The second of the policemen was hit by shotgun pellets and flying glass and went down. In the space of three seconds seven more shots were fired. The other patrolman, stunned and disoriented, retreated to the cover of a parked car. He slumped on his haunches against the wheel, the adrenalin that was pumping around his body making him feel nauseous and light-headed.

He looked down to check that he was all right and saw three bright blossomings of blood on his tunic. He realised he had been shot and was amazed that there was no pain.

Within seconds he was unconscious.

Eddie watched in disbelief as the storefront window shattered, the roar of the shotgun blast sending an electric charge of adrenalin through his whole body. He threw himself on the floor, and in a moment of panic he jerked the safety from the grenade, arming it. Benny staggered back into the shop, doubled over and clutching his stomach. He staggered from

side to side, like a drunken chicken, and Eddie would have laughed if he had not been so terrified.

Blood started to ooze in little red worms between Benny's fingers.

Paul lay face down in the doorway of the shop. His eyes were open and there was a growing pool of blood around his head.

One of the women lying on the floor was screaming hysterically. 'Shut her up!' he shouted at Tang.

But Tang could only stare at Benny, who had slumped to his knees making unintelligible sounds.

One of the shop assistants got up and ran for the door. Eddie fired three times but the man kept running. Eddie watched him dart across the street then start to stagger. He reeled into a doorway and sagged to one knee before he collapsed.

Benny was still screaming.

'Shut up, fucking your mother!' Eddie shouted at him.

'They were waiting for us!' Tang screamed.

'Is he still out there?'

'I don't know!'

'Can you see him?'

'I think he's behind the car!'

Eddie felt his courage evaporate, like steam, watching Benny go through his death agony. If he went through that door the policeman would shoot him in the stomach too.

'We have to get to the car!' Tang shouted.

But Eddie could not move.

Madeleine Lacey was just two streets away when she heard the radio call, and even in the clamour of the Lockhart Road traffic she heard the sounds of the gunshots through the open window of her car. It sounded like firecrackers.

She knew she could get to the scene quicker on foot, so she abandoned her Toyota in the middle of the street, ignoring the blaring horns of the drivers behind her, and raced past the startled pedestrians up Marsh and towards Hennessey.

Benny had rolled onto his side on the floor, threshing his legs.

'Help me . . . help me . . .' There was a smear of pink blood on his teeth.

'Shut him up, fucking your mother!' Eddie screamed. A blonde woman, a tourist, was lying face down on the floor a few yards away. She had her hands behind her head and she was whispering something into the carpet, she kept saying 'Jesus' over and over, praying perhaps, or moaning, or cursing, Eddie could not decide which.

Tang grabbed her by the hair and jerked her to her knees. The man with her raised his head in alarm and Tang slammed the pistol onto the back of his skull. His head seemed to bounce on the carpet and then he was still.

'Let's get out of here!' Tang shouted.

He pulled the woman towards the door, the gun jammed into her neck, the other arm around her throat, pulling her backwards towards the exit.

Eddie hesitated. He had the grenade primed. He looked around for the safety pin but he could not find it. He could not carry it like this for ever. Some time he would have to throw it.

He jumped over Benny's writhing body and followed Tang and his hostage towards the door.

The street was deserted for fifty yards in each direction, cars were abandoned in the street, their doors swinging open, blocking it in. Lacey had to fight her way through the press of people who had gathered at the corner to watch.

Now she could see the jeweller's store, the footpath outside littered with shards of glass. A uniformed policeman lay among the glass fragments. Another policeman was hunched behind a parked car, his head lolling on his chest, not moving.

The sight of the two dead policemen enraged her. All her training and instincts told her to wait for back-up, not to act alone. The Hong Kong Police had not yet armed their women detectives with the .38s the men wore. But rage overtook her. To her the taking of a policeman's life was a sin without comparison.

She sprinted along the street, hugging the shopfronts. As she reached the jeweller's she could hear a woman

screaming, and what seemed to be a shouted argument in Cantonese.

The dead policeman was sprawled horribly on his back, his service revolver a few feet away on the footpath. Lacey crawled on her belly through the blood and broken glass and snapped open the chamber. He had not even had the chance to fire one round.

Before she could find cover she heard shouts behind her and she realised the gunmen were coming out of the shop. She had her back turned towards them, she was defenceless and exposed.

Eddie followed Tang out of the shop, screaming threats at the tourists and shop assistants still cringing on the floor. He held the grenade high in the air, still expecting the other policeman to appear from behind the parked car outside the store.

The first patrolman was lying on his back a few yards away, a white woman lying prone beside him, perhaps she had been caught in the crossfire, perhaps just too terrified to move. He ignored her, his attention focused on the second policeman. Where was he?

He heard screaming as the onlookers at both ends of the streets started to run.

Tang pulled the woman towards their car.

'Leave it!' Eddie shouted. They could not get out. An abandoned car had blocked them in against the kerb. Tang did not seem to realise. He let go of the woman to jerk at the door handle. She twisted away and started to run. Tang raised the weapon to shoot at her, hesitated.

'We can't get out,' Eddie shouted.

Tang stared at him, uncomprehending.

The woman was still running.

Tang made up his mind and aimed the Black Star.

Lacey saw the gunman level his pistol at the running woman. To stop him she knew she would need a head shot. She was no markswoman, and even at this range, less than twenty metres, she was not sure she could do it.

She fired twice.

The first bullet took the man in the neck, the other shattered his skull. Tang dropped. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Eddie jerked around.

Lacey stared at him. Jesus. A live grenade. He was holding it high in the air, only the pressure of his thumb keeping the fly-off lever against the body of the grenade. She remembered her briefing. Get behind cover first.

She kept the gun levelled at Eddie and got to her knees. She started to crawl towards the nearest parked car.

Eddie stared at her.

What is he going to do? Lacey thought. Is he going to throw it at me, run for it, what?

In the briefings she was supposed to tell him to drop the grenade and crawl away from it. It seemed ridiculous now. He would never do it. He would throw it first.

'Drop the grenade and crawl away,' Lacey said.

She heard the wail of sirens, saw flashing blue lights at the cross street. It was nearly over. Eddie had heard them too. He was screaming at her in Cantonese to get away from him, to drop the gun.

She kept the revolver trained on him.

Eddie threw the grenade.

They told her in training: Two and a half to four seconds after the fly-off lever is released for the fuse to burn down.

She fired twice, heard the grenade drop onto the footpath and roll towards her. She leaped to her feet, took two strides around the car, and threw herself face forward, her feet towards the grenade.

94

Bangkok

Lord Jim's, in the Oriental Hotel, was named after a character in a Joseph Conrad novel and furnished in polished teak and burnished brass to resemble the deck of a nineteenth-century clipper. Its seafood luncheon buffet was famous around Bangkok and it was here that Noelle booked a table to celebrate his thirty-third birthday.

I should be proud of you, she thought, as she watched him from across the table. So much like Baptiste, the same blue-black hair and those same deep-blue eyes with the dark, thick lashes that are almost hypnotic. An easy charm, so assured, sophisticated, tastefully and expensively dressed. My son.

But I am not proud.

'I saw papa the other day,' he said.

She felt herself tense. She knew, of course, what was coming.

'He looks worse.'

She raised an eyebrow. A white-jacketed waiter cleared the remains of their meal from the table. She hoped the cognacs would arrive soon.

'He's dying.'

'We are all dying, Luc. That is not just a Buddhist philosophy.'

Lucien ignored her. 'He wants to see you.'

'Why?'

'For God's sake, *maman*. I think he only has a few weeks. Can't you bury your differences?'

'I would rather bury him first.'

'*Maman*, please.'

'No, Luc.'

'Do it for me.'

'Now you are trying to manipulate me. Forget it. My own father wrote the classic work on the subject of manipulation and Baptiste wrote the appendix. Now I am immune.'

'He loves you. He says so many times you are the only woman in the world he ever loved. He is hurting so bad. Please.'

'Baptiste loves me because I do not love him. That is the secret to your father's soul. If I went back to him, which thank God I never shall, he would lose interest again in a month. Your father is a pit bull who tells himself he is a romantic because otherwise he would lie awake at night screaming at his own evil. He is the devil with a brandy balloon. All my life I try and explain this to you and you do not listen. That is not my fault. But please do not try and make me cry for him because his cigarettes have killed him. I would rather weep for a scorpion being crushed under the wheels of a truck.'

'*Maman*,' he murmured.

'Please. Spare me the shocked glances.'

'I admit he is no angel but you talk about him like he is Hitler or Stalin. Because he hurt you does not make him a monster.'

'Oh Luc, what has happened to you?'

'Nothing has happened to me. Perhaps I have just grown up at last. A man has to live his own life. I cannot live your way for ever.'

'It was easier, no? Easier to take what he has to give than live like an honest man.'

'Perhaps I do not have this perfect picture of the world that you have. I grew up in a different world. It was not so gentle.'

'My world was not gentle, believe me.'

'I am thirty-three years old. And yes, you are right when you say we are all dying. I am starting to realise this too. It is a great shock for a young man. Now I want to live a little before I die. I do not want to struggle any more. What would you have me do? Baptiste has offered me everything. Should I say no to him, *hein?* He is my father. It is my birthright.

It is easy for you, you always have such nice things all your life.'

'Anything you need I can give to you!'

'Yes, you would give it to me like I was still a little boy!'

'So why is it different if your father gives it to you?'

'I don't know,' he said with a shrug.

'Perhaps because I could never give you enough. You are greedy. Like he is greedy.'

'Why be satisfied with just bread when there is a whole banquet on the table?'

The fight went out of her. What was the point in arguing with him? She always knew it was a fight she would one day lose. The Thais had a saying: *There is rice in the fields, there is fish in the water.* A little should be enough. How could she explain that to him? Her son, who always wanted more?

The cognacs arrived and she sipped hers slowly, staring at the dark river.

'There is nothing I can ever say to you that will change your mind, is there?'

His eyes were bright and angry. 'I just wish you would not try. I have to make my own decisions. You must respect that.'

'All right, Luc,' she whispered. 'I don't want to quarrel with you no more.'

'Will you go and see *papa* for me? Please?'

'If that is what you want.'

'It is not so much to ask.'

She nodded. She raised her glass. 'Happy birthday for tomorrow, Luc.'

He touched her glass with his own. 'Thank you, *maman*.'

'As you are going to be away on your birthday.' She reached down under her seat, found her shoulder bag. 'I have something here for you.'

'A present?' he said.

It was gift wrapped in soft tissue paper, and tied with a royal blue ribbon. He leaned across the table to accept it and she kissed his cheek.

'It is heavy,' he said. He started to open it but she stopped him.

'It is for your birthday.'
'Can't I open it now?'
'Wait until the day. It is not the same otherwise.'
He shrugged. 'Okay.'
'How long will you be away?'
'A week, no more.'
'You will come and see me when you get back?'
'Sure.'
'Straight away?'
'Of course.' He looked at his watch. 'One more cognac and I have to go. I still have not packed.' He leaned across the table and took her hand. 'You promise me you will go and see papa?'
'I promise,' she said, and smiled back at him. She was relieved their feud was finally over. It seemed the war had gone on for ever.

95

On the Continental flight from San Francisco the entertainment channel replayed half an hour of World News featuring the now famous video footage of the street gun battle in Hong Kong in which one of the thieves was gunned down on camera by a police detective. It was amateur footage, taken by a German tourist, and the images were muddled. Keelan had seen it replayed countless times on CNN, the focus distorted, the sound not quite synchronised, the hand-held camera losing its subject at the moment the shots were fired, hitting the pavement as the grenade exploded and the cameraman dived for the ground. Stills from the footage had appeared in all the national newspapers.

A jewellery store heist was of course not news in itself, not in the United States, where the population had become inured to violent crime. What was sensational about this robbery was that the criminals had used live grenades and that the shooting of one of the perpetrators had been captured on film. For the networks it was like a live cop show.

Lacey's name had been suppressed but he had recognised her from the blurred images on his hotel screen in the Holiday Inn, and had immediately phoned her at her apartment in Pokfulam.

She seemed calm, if remote. She was shaken but unharmed, a doctor had given her some medication in case she had trouble sleeping, she said, but so far she was fine. She was suspended from duty while the incident was investigated. Routine.

Keelan wondered how she would react after the shock wore off. Only once in his police career had he been required to use his own sidearm, during a raid on a San Francisco crack house. The man had died and Keelan had been unable to keep any food down for three days.

The entertainment channel moved on to sport, to a big NBL game. He switched his headphones to another channel and listened to some classical music and turned away from the screen, stared at the queues of people outside the toilets, at a small child running up and down the aisle pursued by his harried mother.

Bertolli had slipped away from him, again. The debt to Anna and Caroline remained unpaid. Until that night in Berkeley he had retained a sense of justice; he had believed that the system worked. He no longer thought that, no longer had faith in his own society. He felt alienated, adrift. Now he simply went through the daily routines of his life, while inwardly he struggled to decide what he should do. He felt that his soul had withered and died. Hope and justice are essential for life to thrive; he felt he had lost both, and could see no path to redemption.

There was no spirit left in him; just the rustling of dried leaves.

But there was Lacey. He cared for her as much as he had ever cared for any human being, including Anna. But there was a barrier between them and he now did not see how that could be surmounted. Somehow he would have to put down his past; but his past was a part of him, had eaten into him like rust, become inseparable.

He stared out of his window. He was thirty-five thousand feet above the Pacific, in the night, lost between the East and the West, looking for some light in that deep and unfathomable dark.

Rain hammered down in grey sheets, washed ankle deep down Nathan Road, the *nullahs* overflowing. Ruby looked out of the window of the Sze Hoi, perched on top of the Austin Building, and felt it tremble in the teeth of the gale. Far below her people fought their way along the street, their bodies bent towards the wind. Cardboard and bits of paper were hurled high into the air. A page of the *South China Morning Post* slapped against the restaurant window and was suspended there for a moment in the brute breath of the wind.

Ruby chose a basket of deep-fried chicken feet from the

dim sum cart. On the other side of the table Vincent was content to just sip his tea. He had asked for this meeting, no doubt to beg for his money. She would put him off with some excuse. Vincent was finished now.

He looked even more cadaverous than usual. His face was gaunt, his eyes were glassy and unfocused. Looks like some addict in Mongkok, Ruby thought.

'Shoot him down in the street like a dog,' he murmured, half to himself.

Still mourning for Eddie. Think I have not cried a river of tears for him? Ruby thought. Even after he scares me half to death with a knife the night before he dies?

'Joss,' she said.

'Yes, joss.' He was slumped in the chair, his arms hanging loose, all the essence drained out of him. 'I am your *tai lo* now,' he said.

Ruby almost laughed in his face. You, Vincent? You have the liver of a sheep. I think I will find another company.

'Tell me about our business in Golden Mountain.'

'We have some bad luck with the Monkey,' Ruby said, using the nickname she had ascribed to John Bertolli.

'What bad luck, Ruby-ah?'

'Says he has another supplier, says he can get number four at a better price.'

Vincent looked away. He did not believe her.

'Not my fault, heya. Someone offers him fifteen units at one-twenty a kilo.'

Vincent smiled but his face betrayed nothing.

She felt suddenly vulnerable. How do you talk to a man when you know he is not thinking about what is between your legs? Gives him too much power. 'Won't let you down no more, heya. No more gambling, no more bad luck things. Promise you this time, okay.'

Vincent sipped his tea and said nothing.

'I will pay everything I owe.'

'Eddie tells me to forget about your debt before he goes to the west.'

'May the gods piss on the current of air who does this to him.'

'Can do better than that,' Vincent whispered. 'Will wash her myself. Cut her with a thousand knives until she screams to me to let her die.'

Ruby averted her eyes. Vincent was just a White Fan. Embarrassing to hear him talk like this. Maybe he has gone a little crazy.

The building shook again in the wind. Through the window she saw the tattered clouds tumbling over the high rises of Kowloon before the gathering storm.

Vincent's belt pager summoned him to a phone. Without a word he read the message, got up and walked quickly across the restaurant to the foyer.

Ruby looked at his bowl. He had not touched any food, but he had left his chopsticks in the bowl, upright, the death sign.

She looked around. The restaurant had emptied, as if by magic. Even the waiters had gone.

Dew neh loh moh!

She scrambled in her bag for her cellular phone and punched in a number. A woman's voice told her Chief Superintendent McReadie was out. She hung up, dialled Wanchai Police Headquarters and was patched through to the CID desk.

'Brian Kwok.'

'It's Ruby.'

'Tell you never to ring me here!' he hissed.

'Vincent is going to kill me! Gone crazy. Talking about washing the *king chat* who shot Eddie-ah.'

'Where are you?'

'In the Sze Hoi in Austin Road. Got to help me!'

'That's in Kowloon!'

Ruby glanced towards the elevators. Four young men dressed almost identically in dark suits and wrap-around sunglasses got out of the lift and walked quickly past the reception desk. They pulled cleavers and long knives from under their coats.

She stood up. 'Got to help me!'

Too late for that, heya. She was all alone. The four men formed a semi-circle around her. They were in no hurry.

Always wanted to be a good girl. Not my fault all the bad

that happens. Only ever do this business for Eddie. Just want a fun life . . .

From a long time ago the little girl astride the water buffalo in the Shatin rice paddi screamed at her to be careful. She could see the men standing over Ruby with their sharp knives.

She screamed and screamed but Ruby did not hear and Ruby did not try to run.

Because, finally, there was nowhere left to run to.

96

A tropical cyclone was moving north east from Vietnam its centre just south of Hainan island. Keelan's 747 was buffeted by the wings of the storm. Babies and young children screamed as the aircraft bucked in the air and the woman in the seat next to him was noisily sick. At times they seemed to bounce and skid like a car travelling too fast on a dirt road. He felt his own stomach clench like a fist and a cold oily sweat greased the palms of his hands.

After two hours of buffeting Keelan was relieved to hear the flaps rumble into position. A cluster of white apartments appeared for a moment etched against a green and rocky hill and then was swallowed up again by the clouds. Keelan knew the Kai Tak approach was one of the toughest in the world, even in good weather. In other airports the ILS would lead the aircraft to a safe landing almost automatically but here the pilot had to align with a red-and-white checked board on the side of a mountain. At around seven hundred feet the captain would put the aircraft on a sharp 47.2 degree starboard turn, practically standing the jet on its wingtip.

Keelan saw the lights of Mongkok's high rises dance giddyingly below him. Fifty-four seconds later, by his watch, they were down, rumbling on the concrete ribbon of Kai Tak. He was surprised to find his fists clenched tight on the armrests.

We cling so instinctively to life, he thought. Even when it is empty, it is still so hard to let it go.

He had planned to take a taxi to his apartment, but when he emerged from customs he saw Lacey waiting for him on the other side of the barrier.

'Lace!'

'Hello, *yanqui*,' she said and put her arms around his neck.

'I missed you,' he whispered. 'You okay?'

Her eyes were haunted. 'A little shaken up. I'm glad you're back. Rough flight?'

'Ever been on one of those amusement park rides where they strap you into a cage and spin you around in different directions so that you don't know which way is up, and the person next to you is sick and everyone else is screaming and you can't get off?'

She was smiling now. 'That bad?'

'It was worse.'

'You look pale.'

'There goes the myth of the tough drug agent. And here I am confessing all this to a real hero.'

The smile melted away. 'No hero, John. I've been having nightmares every night since it happened.'

'You and me both. In my nightmare the guy shot you.'

She clung to him again, tighter. When she pulled away her eyes were bright. 'I need a drink,' she said.

'Good idea.' He picked up his bag and followed her out into the gathering storm.

A Signal 8 warning had been issued, indicating that gusts of up to sixty knots were anticipated around the harbour, sending shipping scurrying into the typhoon shelters and cancelling ferry services.

The shops along Lockhart Road were closed and shuttered, and even at four o'clock in the afternoon the street was almost deserted, except for a few unfortunates struggling towards the MTR station. A tram clattered by, its brightly painted sides caked with mud.

There was a gathering of ex-pats in the Press Club; they were the ones who had decided to tell their wives they had been trapped by the oncoming cyclone and would be forced to sit out the duration at the bar.

'Mac said that if you weren't too tired from the flight I was to bring you over to his place for dinner tonight. I think he's got quite fond of you.'

He grinned. 'Can't understand why – right?'

She grinned back. 'Right. Although this is an honour

for me as well as you. I haven't been over there since Christmas.'

Keelan looked around the room. There was a new addition to the gallery of photographs on the wall, and he smiled. Lacey flushed with embarrassment.

'I told you you'd get your picture in here,' Keelan said. There was a new black-and-white photograph mounted on the wall; Lacey, pushing the press photographer against the rail of the mezzanine in the Queens Plaza. The image captured the journalist's astonishment, his spectacles awry on his face, and the surprise on the face of the police constable looking on.

'I stopped coming here because of that photograph,' she said.

'Hey, not everyone can be famous.'

'Notorious. There's a difference. It nearly cost me a grade.'

'Did you ask for a copy for the grandchildren?'

'Every day for about a week afterwards I kept finding brown manila envelopes on my desk with enlarged prints inside. They even started a caption competition around the office.'

'What won?'

'"*Next time you get my best side or I'll beat you to death with my handbag.*" It didn't get my vote but some of the guys around the department seemed to find it amusing.'

'No getting away from you these days, Lace. The inflight news had you as a major item.'

He was mocking her again. 'I'm glad you find it so funny.'

'You sure are a glory hound.' He stopped smiling. 'Hey, you had to do it. You saved that woman's life. Those guys had already killed two cops. They had live grenades, for Christ's sake.'

'Tyler sent me to see a stress counsellor. We talked about that. He said I had no choice either.'

'Hey, I agree with him.'

'You ever shot anyone, John?'

'Once.'

'And?'

'And I didn't sleep properly for weeks. The guy had a record of violent crime and if I hadn't used my weapon he would have killed me. Still. It's the nightmares that make you different from the psychopath who kills for fun. But I'll give you a tip, Lace. Better to be the one pulling the

trigger than . . .' He didn't want to go on with that line of thought.

She laid a hand on his. 'I heard what happened over there. About Bertolli. Mac told me.'

He shrugged.

'I hear you've been suspended.'

'What it amounts to is they've asked me to send in my resignation before the acceptance arrives.'

'I see. So what are you going to do?'

'I don't know yet. I'll tidy up things here and then . . . then I'll see.'

The question of what would happen between them hung unanswered.

He passed a hand over his eyes. 'Maybe it's for the best. For the last couple of years I felt like I was trying to fill a string bag full of sand. I did a lot of shovelling but nothing ever happened.' He ordered two more beers. A squall of rain splattered against the windows. 'Will we get home tonight?'

'Change of subject.'

Keelan's face was taut. 'Maybe I should have done it. Pulled the trigger.'

'No you shouldn't.'

'Why not? No more Bertolli, no more sleepless nights. But if I'd have done it, I'm no better than them, right? That's how the argument goes. But . . .'

'But?'

'But if there's no justice, if guys like Bertolli can just walk away from something like this, what's the point? They're laughing at us, Lace.'

'It's laws that keep us out of the jungle.'

'This is a jungle. It's a jungle with computers and office blocks and travelators and belt pagers but it's still a jungle. The laws don't work. You can be the most evil son of a bitch you want but if you're strong and you're smart and you can buy a sharp lawyer you survive. The law is weak and it's dumb. That's why guys like Louis Huu and John Bertolli walk away every time.'

She had never seen him like this. Now she understood the darkness in him, could see where his inner eye had been focused all this time. And it scared her. It scared her

because she cared about him, loved him she supposed they called it. It scared her because he was suddenly out of reach. 'You can't undo the past.'

'Sure. But there's no living with it either.' He finished his beer. 'I really thought I could do it, Lace. I really thought it was the only way out for me. Maybe I was right.'

'You can't do that.'

'Two years, Lace. I still can't sleep, can't get through this. What other way is there?'

'There's you and me.'

He could not meet her eyes. 'The trouble isn't you. The trouble is me. I don't feel I deserve to be happy. It's my fault they're dead.'

'You were just doing your job.'

'Which is why they got killed. Me doing my job. A job that didn't count for a damn in the end, because my job was futile and pointless. It was a private crusade I could not win.' He took his hand away. 'I can't even be happy any more without feeling guilty about it.'

'You can't spend your whole life feeling sorry for yourself!'

'It's not me I feel sorry for. It's them.'

Lacey didn't know what to say to him. For God's sake. He was a good man, a good cop. It wasn't his fault. 'Life has to go on.'

'Why?'

She fumbled in her purse for her car keys. She'd had enough of this. 'So what are you going to do?' she said, angry now.

'Like I said, I don't know.'

'Find a new way to martyr yourself?'

'Don't get mad,' he said, softly. 'It's not your problem. I shouldn't have made it your problem.'

'You're wrong. I'm not mad. I don't give a damn.' She finished her drink, picked up her car keys and headed for the door.

She was in no mood to wait for the ancient elevator. She ran down the fire stairs, Keelan behind her.

'Wait,' he said.

The wind hit them like a physical blow. The typhoon was on its way. It felt like a bad one.

97

Pokfulam

The rain had turned building sites into lakes and the wind stripped a blizzard of leaves from the trees. A torrent of mud and vegetation had washed down the Peak and choked the *nullahs*. Black clouds climbed the sky over Lantau and sheet lightning flickered on the horizon. Evening fell halfway through the afternoon.

The storm had knocked out the power to the apartment. Without the air conditioning, and unable to open the windows because of the howling wind, the apartment soon became stiflingly hot. Charlotte went in search of batteries for her transistor radio, so she could get updates on the storm's progress, but the only ones she found were a size too small.

Charlotte hated typhoons. Her village near Quezon City had been destroyed by a cyclone when she was eleven years old and an uncle and cousin had been killed. The terror of that night, and the mudslide that followed in the early hours of the following morning, lived with her still.

She lit all the candles she could find, and fell on her knees in her bedroom before a small statue of the Virgin and prayed for deliverance. She prayed that the mistress would get back soon. She did not want to sit out the storm alone.

At around five o'clock she heard the doorbell ring. Lacey had her own key but Charlotte realised she might not be able to find it in the darkened corridor.

She threw open the door.

Vincent walked straight in, the Chinese-made Makarov held in both hands. He held it between Charlotte's eyes. The silencer barrel made the weapon seem insanely huge, like a small cannon. He slammed the door behind him with his foot.

'Name is Vincent,' he said, smiling. 'Do not want to hurt you, okay. But you make any sound they will send you back to Manila without your head.'

Rain slammed against the windshield and Lacey's Toyota was buffeted by the wind. The traffic lights on the corner of Lockhart and Fenwick were out and Lacey crept through the intersection in first gear. But except for a few taxis ploughing through the flood, the streets were mostly deserted.

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

'Have we got a chance?' Lacey said at last.

'Just give me some time. Let me think this through.'

'How long do you want? I mean, I've known you for more than a year, *yanqui*.' Her eyes were bright with angry tears. This was not a good time to be doing this. She felt raw and punished after the shooting in the street. She had been looking to Keelan for refuge.

'It's not you, it's me,' he said.

'Oh, piss off!'

Keelan suddenly felt something hit him hard on the side of the head. He looked at her amazed. She had punched him. 'What did you do that for?'

'Because you're an utter bastard.'

They drove the rest of the way in silence. At Aberdeen, she turned onto Shek Pai Wan Road and headed north towards Pokfulam. The car splashed through twitching pools of rain.

'I have to stop by my apartment before we go to Mac's,' Lacey said. 'I want to check on Charlotte. She's terrified of typhoons. The last time one came through here I found her a blubbering mess under the bed. It's worse than having a cat.'

'Had her fixed?' Keelan said, trying to defuse the tension.

'Charlotte is a good Catholic girl. I don't need to.'

'You don't have a bad left jab for a southpaw.'

'If I didn't have to keep both hands on the wheel I would have probably beaten you unconscious.'

* * *

From the window of the apartment Vincent watched Lacey's Toyota swing into the undercroft. There would not be time for a thousand knives, he decided. But there were twenty-five bullets in the clip and he would use them all. He thought he would start with the knees first.

98

The barrier in the undercroft was raised and unattended. Perhaps the cyclone had sent the attendant scurrying home before the end of his shift. Lacey parked the car in her designated space.

'Want to come up?' she said.

'I don't want to outrage Charlotte.'

Lacey shrugged and got out of the car. Outside the rain hissed down like molten shot, the wind whipping through the palms. Its force was channelled through the concrete tunnels of the undercroft, and Lacey had to struggle towards the elevators, leaning into the downdraughts.

It could be different, Keelan thought. If I turned my back on everything that has happened to me, if I forgot about Caroline and Anna, if I forgot about Bertolli, if I forgot that I was to blame for all of that; then it could be different between Madeleine Lacey and myself.

But one day I might wake up and find myself loving her as much as Anna. One day she could come home and tell me she was going to have a child. And it wouldn't be fair and it wouldn't be right for me to be alive and laughing and loving while they are dead. If I cannot make amends with Bertolli then at least I will not compound the tragedy by forgetting.

Lacey's mobile rang. He picked it up.

'Who is that?'

'John Keelan. Who's this?'

'Detective Sergeant Kwok. Can I speak with Inspector Lacey please. It is urgent.'

'She's just gone up to her apartment.'

'Tell her to wait for me there, please. There has been a threat against her life. She will need to organise protection.'

'Who made this threat?'

'I will be there in a quarter of an hour. Please ask her to wait.'

He rang off.

Keelan replaced the handset on its cradle. His mind raced. He had met Kwok a couple of times. A calm, quiet sort of guy. Something had to be very wrong.

He wiped the condensation from the window. On the other side of the undercroft a red BMW had been parked across two bays. He read the license plate. RW-163. Ruby Wen had boasted to him once that she had paid one hundred and twenty-five thousand Hong Kong dollars for those tags.

'Jesus Christ.'

He got out of the car and started to run. Even down here the wind pounded him. It was like running through soft sand.

There were pools of water in the foyer blown in by the wind. The power was out, there were no lights, no elevators. Keelan threw open the fire door. Almost pitch dark. He felt his way up the first flight of concrete stairs, heard her footsteps above him on the stairwell.

'Lace!'

A fire door slammed shut. Lacey had reached the fourth floor. She could not hear him now.

He tried to run, slipped and hammered his shin against one of the steps. Cursing with pain, he scrambled up two more flights. One to go. His heart banged in his chest. The BMW meant something. Why would Ruby Wen be here? Or perhaps Ruby had brought someone . . .

Or someone she knew was using her car.

He reached the fourth floor and threw open the fire door. The corridor was in darkness. He saw the glow of a keylight, heard her fumbling with the lock.

'Lace!'

'John?'

'Wait,' he said.

He ran along the wall. If someone was watching from the spyhole in the door, they would know.

She shone the keylight towards him. 'John?'

He knocked the light out of her hands.

The door opened, someone on the other side flicked on a very powerful torch. Blinded, Lacey threw up a hand to shield her eyes. Keelan threw himself around the door and kicked out. He heard a soft popping noise like someone removing a champagne cork. Something smacked into the wall a few inches from his head, deafening him.

He felt a numbing blow to the side of the head and he went down. He heard two more muffled concussions. He lay stunned, fighting the heaviness in his limbs. The torch was on the floor, the beam directed at the doorway. He saw the silhouette of a man jump over him and into the corridor.

Vincent had expected to finish her off quickly. The force of the first blow numbed his wrist, and he felt the Makarov drop out of his hand. Then Lacey's heel hit him in the ribs. He fended off a blow to his groin, to his face. She was fast, and very, very good.

Vincent was no fighter. He took a step back out of the doorway and the torchlight. She kept coming forward but he was, for the moment, invisible. He lashed out in panic, felt the pointed end of his shoe connect with something soft. He heard her scream and he kicked out again.

But then the torchbeam swung up into his face. He heard the unmistakable pop of the silenced Makarov, twice, three times. He ran blindly.

99

Lacey sat up. The pain from her knee was like an electric shock, and a blow to her head had left her dizzy and nauseous. She wasn't sure if she could stand.

She heard the fire door slam.

She fumbled for the torch, found Keelan in the darkness. There was a dark slick of blood on one side of his face, a deep laceration just above his hairline where Vincent had struck him with the barrel of the Makarov.

'Are you all right?'

'I think I hit him. I'm sure I hit him.'

Doors had opened all along the corridor, there were faces, torches, flickering candles. Frightened voices called out in Cantonese and English. Lacey stood up and shone the torch down the passage towards the stairwell. There was no sign of Vincent.

'Are you all right?' she asked Keelan again.

'Can't seem to get my balance.' He shoved the pistol into her hand. She checked the clip in the torchlight, re-cocked the weapon.

'Stay here,' she said. Another sharp pain in her knee. She limped towards the fire stairs, supporting her weight against the wall. She pushed open the fire door. The torch beam picked out black bloodstains on the concrete. Leaning on the guard rail she followed them down.

Third floor.

Second.

Suddenly there were no more bloodstains.

He was behind her.

'Missus Lacey?'

Keelan recognised Charlotte's voice. She was standing

over him, holding a candle. She stared at the spreading bloodstain on his shirt, her eyes wide in terror.

'Yanqui.'

Keelan had wedged himself upright against the wall and was staring at the hole in his shirtfront with the same dread and astonishment as Lacey's housemaid. 'Hello, Charlotte,' he said. 'I've got a bit of a problem here.'

Vincent had propped himself in the corner of the stairwell. She spun around with the torch and for a moment he was illuminated in the beam. He was grinning at her and there was blood on his teeth.

Instinctively she knew he would go for her eyes. He lashed out and she reeled back out of range, but her knee would not take the weight. She fell backwards down the stairs. Her hand snaked out for the guard rail to stop herself, she dropped the torch and heard it smash on the concrete below.

Now there was utter blackness.

Vincent was scrambling in the darkness for the gun. Lacey pulled herself upright on the rail and dragged herself down the stairs. There was a soft concussion, and a spray of concrete hit her in the face. She cried out in pain and surprise.

'Monkey bitch! Fucking your mother! Now you die! Like Eddie! Your turn to die, monkey leper bitch!'

He fired again and again, spraying the silenced bullets around him in the darkness. Lacey curled herself into a ball on the concrete landing, making herself as small a target as possible.

Then silence.

He was dragging himself down the stairs towards her. His breath was laboured, like an asthmatic. 'Coming for you, monkey bitch. Coming for you.'

Keep your head, Lace. Keep your head and wait for him to come.

She felt for the rail, tried to ease herself slowly back to her feet, keeping her weight off her injured leg.

She felt sweat stinging her eyes, soaking her shirt. Trying

to stay in control. She could feel him very close. How many bullets left in the clip?

He fired again.

The bullet ricocheted around the stairwell, she ducked her head out of instinct, and slipped, fell headlong. Her ankle turned underneath her, her head hit the rail. She lay on her back, stunned. She tried to move her leg and the pain made her cry out.

She was helpless.

Brian Kwok's Nissan pulled into the apartment forecourt. He grabbed a flashlight and jumped out.

No one at the security desk and the elevators were out. As he groped towards the fire door he heard the muffled but unmistakable sound of a gunshot. *Dew neh loh moh*! They had found her already. He fumbled for the .38 in the holster in the small of his back and pushed open the heavy door. He pressed his back against the concrete wall.

He heard shouts above him.

'Inspector Lacey!'

'Brian, be careful!'

He sprinted up the steps, three at a time. His flashlight made him an easy target. A volley hit him in the chest but the adrenalin kept him running.

Lacey listened to Brian Kwok dying. He was very close. Her fingers scrabbled frantically on the stairs, searching for his weapon. She could hear Vincent, almost on top of her now.

'Going to kill . . . you . . . monkey bitch.'

100

Charles de Gaulle Airport. Paris

The first class passengers were first off the Air France 747, their luggage bearing priority stickers. Lucien hurried through customs. There was a limousine waiting to pick him up outside the terminal and take him to the George V hotel in the city. It had been a long flight, he was tired and he had important appointments scheduled for the morning. Some gentlemen from Marseille were meeting him to discuss the future importation of what Lucien liked to call Asian indigenous produce.

He was waved to one side by one of the customs officials. Lucien made no attempt to hide his exasperation.

'Is this really necessary?' he asked the man.

The *douanier* fingered the leather on the Louis Vuitton cases with mocking appreciation and asked him if he would mind opening his luggage for inspection.

Unbelievable. Almost midnight, and they were going to search him.

'You have anything to declare, *monsieur*?'

'Of course not,' Lucien snapped. He unlocked his case. The man started to unpack his shirts.

'Careful, they're very expensive. Pure silk.'

The *douanier* did not comment. He was very thorough, more than was perhaps necessary for a random search, Lucien thought. What on earth did he think he was doing? Another customs official and two men in plain clothes with security lapel badges appeared almost from nowhere.

'What's going on?' he snapped.

'We have been advised there is a large shipment of illegal narcotics arriving on this flight,' one of the plain clothes officials told him.

Did they really think he was a mule?

The *douanier* was examining the lining of his suitcases.

'May I go?' Lucien said.

One of the officials picked up the gift Noelle had given him. 'What is in here, monsieur?'

'It is a birthday present. From my mother.'

He started to unwrap it.

'What are you doing?'

The man held it towards him. 'You wish to open it yourself, sir?'

'Not until my birthday,' Lucien said, and one of the *douaniers* smirked. *Cul de vache!* Lucien looked at his watch. Well, it *was* his birthday now, anyway. He snatched it back from the man and tore off the tissue paper.

'This is absurd.'

Inside was a large box, carved from teak. He opened it. There were two objects inside. One was a sixty-minute audio cassette. The other was a sealed plastic bag, marked with the numbers 999 and containing, by Lucien's estimation, seven hundred grams of high grade heroin.

It was a small room, and the walls were painted a dull green. The two plain-clothed customs officials sat on the other side of the desk. Lucien's luggage was scattered around the desk and on the floor. Two uniformed *douaniers* were ripping out the linings of his suitcases, looking for hidden compartments.

As if he would be that stupid as to be his own mule. Like some *voyou*!

A small cassette player had been placed in the middle of the table. Lucien heard his mother's voice:

'I am sorry, Luc. I know that by the time you hear this, you will probably hate me. But I am sure it is for the best. You have had thirty-three years to make up your mind what to do with your life. Now you have chosen. All this time I watched the man that I loved descend into evil. I will not allow this to happen to you.

'Someone once told me that one day I must choose between my blood and my heart. I believe now I have made that choice. You may imagine that I have betrayed you. But it is not betrayal

if it is just. How can it be? I cannot allow you to wreck more lives for your own personal pleasure as he has done. What you are doing is an evil, Lucien. You have to understand that. As a child I punished you to teach you the lessons of life. Now I must punish you again. I am sorry. There is no choice for me. I love you, Luc.'

The tape ended.

The two men stared at him.

'I was framed,' Lucien said. 'I did not know what was in the package. This proves it.'

The two men smiled. One of them took the tape out of the recorder and put it in his pocket. Lucien suspected he would never see that tape again.

101

Pokfulam

Tyler watched the ambulance crews load the bodies into the ambulance. The rain hammered onto the concrete forecourt, dripped from the zippered green body bags, ran down the road in rivers. Christ Almighty. What a year.

The force of a wind gust blew open the foyer doors. He ran outside and ducked inside his car.

Lacey sat in the passenger seat, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Her face was specked with tiny scabbed cuts made by flying concrete. She was shivering.

'Shit,' Tyler said.

'I didn't know he was hurt,' Lacey said.

'Wouldn't have made any difference, Lace. Charlotte called the ambulance straight away. They got here as fast as they could.'

'I could have stayed with him.'

Tyler watched two other detectives run from the foyer back to their cars. What a shitty night, all way round.

'I'll get you to the hospital,' he said.

'I wish I'd stayed with him.'

'Rush of blood. I would have done the same thing.' He felt the car rock in the wind. 'What happened on the stairs?'

'Brian saved my life.'

Poor bloody Brian. Someone would have to tell his family. Sweet suffering Christ. I suppose it had better be me.

'I thought I was going to die. He was standing right over me there in the dark. And then he just fell on top of me.'

'Who shot him, Lace?'

'Keelan. Keelan shot him outside the apartment. But he ran off, he just wouldn't go down.'

She was shivering harder now. Shock. He'd better get her to the hospital. 'It's okay, Lace,' he said.

'I thought he was never going to die.' She put her head on his shoulder. He thought she would cry, but she didn't. Not Lace. She was too tough.

102

The typhoon had turned its back on Hong Kong, taking with it the musts and the pall of pollution, leaving the air sparkling and clean. The sky was watery blue, just some wisps of horsetails over the mainland. From her balcony at Pokfulam Lacey could see islands on the horizon she had never known were there. A jetfoil streamed away towards Macao, a tanker made its way into the Gage Roads.

Charlotte let McReadie into the flat, ushered him through to the balcony. He sat down beside her on one of the director's chairs, but she did not look up and she did not speak. For a long while they sat in silence looking out over the sea.

'Mac,' Lacey said, after what seemed like an eternity.

'Lace.'

'Something I have to ask you. It's about Ruby Wen.'

McReadie felt his body tense. 'What about her?'

'Was she paying you off?'

'Jesus Christ!'

'I have to know, Uncle Mac,' she said in the same flat voice.

'What kind of a question is that? Of course not!'

'When Keelan came back from Bangkok, he said Ruby told him you were Eddie's eyes and ears in Arsenal Street. It was how he got away after we issued the warrant. He knew it was coming.'

'Ruby Wen was a pathological liar, God rest her rotten soul.'

'It's okay, he swore me to secrecy. I haven't told anyone else. Neither did he.'

'You can tell whoever you damned well please. The fact is, I have plenty of enemies out there, Lace. A cop is always a soft target.'

'You know what was wrong with Keelan?' Lacey said. 'He

lost his sense of purpose. Once you lose that there's nowhere to go. And that's when you become cynical and you take the money. Not just for yourself, but to prove how rotten the system is. It's a kind of revenge. If they won't let me save the world I'll make it a little more rotten.'

'You're talking through your hat, Lace.'

'When you weigh one thing against the other, I think he should have taken the money, don't you?'

'Jesus.'

'Well, don't you? The system couldn't get Bertolli. They couldn't bring back Keelan's wife and his daughter. It couldn't pay him back for everything he had given.'

McReadie sighed. She was such an idealist, his niece. 'I did take some money, once. But not from Eddie Lau. From one of his enemies. I did it to set him up, and if I hadn't taken any money the guys involved wouldn't have believed what I was telling them.'

'And what happened to the money?'

'I gave it to the children's hospital down the road.' He knew she didn't believe him. That was the problem with the truth, a good lie always sounded more plausible. 'Christ Lace, it wasn't me.'

'Then who?'

'Jesus, Lace. Let it be. He's dead now.'

After a while Lacey said: 'Brian?'

'Tyler rang me this morning. Brian's wife knew about it all along. Maybe Eddie had him over a barrel some way. I don't think he was taking money. Shit, these guys live right next door to the triads. We don't know what kind of pressure there is. Look, just let it be, he saved your life, didn't he?' McReadie stood up. 'I'd better get in to work. Take it easy.'

He changed his mind, came back. 'You are so fucking self-righteous,' he said.

'I'm sorry, Mac. I had to ask.'

'Tell me something. Did Keelan believe Ruby Wen?'

'No.'

'Shows you. You can rely on your friends before your family.'

* * *

Lacey sat on the balcony, watching the swell on the ocean, the blue and beating heart of the world. Beyond the horizon a vast and rapidly changing world.

She would get over this, and she would get back to work, and she would stay; but in the next two years others with less well-avowed intentions would leave, a diaspora of evil reaching out to Europe, and to Australasia, and the United States. The triads were a new evil for the West, but not an original one. Their tentacles would reach into lives big and small. And as with all corruption, it was not the evil itself that imperilled, but how quickly the contagion bred on itself.

'Oh, John,' she murmured. Surely now he had paid his price.

Bangkok

A beautiful young Thai left the bedroom holding a silver bowl. It was covered with a towel. An evil smell emanated from it.

Noelle pushed open the door. Baptiste lay on the bed. She was truly shocked by his appearance. His lips were the colour of raw liver and the flesh had wasted off his bones, so that the shape of his skull was clearly visible. He looked like a pile of bones covered with parchment.

His cigarettes were on the table beside the bed.

'Noelle.'

'Hello Baptiste.'

'I thought you would not come.'

She sat down on the chair beside him. The room smelled of death and the blinds were drawn. She remembered how she had first met this man, in the lobby of the Hotel Constellation in Vientiane. He had been the most romantic, the most breath-taking vision she had ever seen in her life.

So this is how it ends.

'Will you light me a cigarette?' he said.

She picked up the packet of Gauloises – at his age, and almost dead, he had changed brands again, God only knew

why – took one out of the packet, lit it and placed it between his lips.

'It is a great thing,' he said, his voice as gentle as gravel. 'I can smoke as much I want now. It is not going to make any difference.'

'Lucien said you wanted to see me.'

'You are still my wife, Noelle. I have always loved you, more than anything else in the world. I wanted you with me at the end.'

'You know, it is sad, Baptiste. You do not even know me.'

'I have known you all my life.'

'It is just the romantic in you talking. You cling to this romance to try and feed that part of yourself that is not cynical and selfish and depraved.'

'You always are good for my ego.'

He started coughing, called for the silver bowl. The young Thai girl that Noelle had seen on her way into the bedroom appeared from the shadows and nursed him through this paroxysm, holding his head, helping him cough the blockage from his lungs. There was phlegm and a little blood.

When he had finished, he lay exhausted, unable to speak.

'I have some news for you. It is about Lucien. He has been arrested.'

A muscle jerked in the corner of Baptiste's mouth. She saw the fear in the yellow-rimmed eyes. It took him several attempts before he was able to get his breath to speak. 'Arrested?'

'He tried to smuggle seven hundred grams of heroin through Charles de Gaulle airport.'

'Impossible . . .'

'Not impossible, *mon cher*.' She leaned closer so that her mouth was close to his ear. 'I made it possible.'

He looked at her, not comprehending. 'You?'

'All my life I tried to protect him from you. But he has your greed in him. A normal, decent life will never be enough for him. For a long time he tries my way, to please me, but deep down he has this greed. It would perhaps have been better if he had been born the son of a poor man, without this temptation that you gave him.'

'What have you done?' Baptiste croaked.

'I destroyed him, Baptiste. God have mercy on my poor soul, I destroyed my own son. I had to do it. I married the Devil, I could not bear it if I spawned another.'

He shook his head, not wanting to believe.

'You still love me now, Baptiste?'

She felt the yellow eyes follow her across the room and to the door.

'Goodbye, Baptiste. I hope your death is kind. I will say a prayer for you.'

And she left, closing the door gently behind her.

103

Queen Mary Hospital, Pokfulam

Lacey held up a sealed bottle no larger than her thumb. Inside the glass was a small, shapeless piece of metal. 'I asked the surgeon to save this,' she said, 'in case you were thinking of starting a collection.'

'A collection?'

'You mean you didn't save the other one?'

It was hard to talk. His mouth felt gummy, his tongue too big for his mouth. His head ached, the cannula was making the inside of his nose itch, and the effects of his last morphine shot were starting to wear off. Every breath was a little agony.

'Get out of here, Lace.'

'I was going to bring flowers but I thought your pals at the agency might give you a hard time. Do you like grapes?'

'No.'

'Good. I could only get plastic ones. Real grapes are out of season.'

'All I want . . . is some Wild Turkey . . . and be left to die . . . in peace.'

'Only the good die young, *yanqui*.'

He felt for her hand on the bed but his right arm was splinted to an IV catheter.

'You're going to make it,' she whispered.

'Not on my own.'

'No, not on your own.' She brushed the hair from his forehead. 'Well, now you've taken a bullet for someone else. Does that even the score, John?'

'I don't . . . know.'

'Isn't it time to put down the load? I never knew them, John, but they were your family, and they loved you. Think about it.

What if it was the other way round? Would you have wanted Anna to torment herself for the rest of her life over you?'

'But it wasn't . . . the other way round.'

'Then let me give you an example a little closer to home.' She held up the vial and shook it, so that the misshapen bullet rattled against the glass. 'This was meant for me. But you walked through the door and you put yourself in the way. If you'd died, I would have spent the rest of my life haunted by that. I don't think I would ever have smiled again. Is that what you would have wanted?'

It was an effort to smile but Keelan managed it. 'Yes,' he said.

After a moment Lacey said: 'All right, now I want you to brace yourself because I'm going to stick my fingers under the dressings, and tear out all the stitches with my nails.'

He laughed this time, and the pain hit him like an electric shock and he gasped and went rigid. 'Shit,' he said, finally, as the spasm passed.

When he opened his eyes Lacey was crying.

'Why are *you* crying? I'm the one . . . in pain.'

'Lay it down, please. I don't want you to hurt any more. You're one of the good guys, remember?'

Keelan closed his eyes. One of the good guys. For a moment he was back in the kitchen of his home in Berkeley, California, feeding his baby daughter. It was raining. Anna was in another room but he remembered calling out to her that Caroline didn't want her mashed pumpkin.

He stood up, just as the kitchen window exploded inwards . . .

Forgive me, he said, to the darkness behind his eyes. Forgive me for bringing this into our lives. I'm sorry Anna. And I'm sorry, Caroline, for destroying your life before it had even begun.

I'm sorry, too, that I never had the chance to even say goodbye . . .

'Put it down,' Lacey repeated. 'It wasn't your fault.'

'You really think . . . I'm worth the effort?'

'No, not really. I must be out of my mind.'

He opened his eyes.

Lacey was leaning over him, he could smell her perfume.

She had put on lip gloss and mascara for him. He was accustomed to the stony, slightly mocking expression she assumed for work hours, but now her face was etched with pain and her concern for him. He felt suddenly overwhelmed. Life keeps coming back to give me a second chance, he thought. Usually in the form of this ballsy homicide detective. I guess it must mean something.

'Come here,' he whispered. Lacey leaned closer to the bed. She was wearing a blouse of silk cerise, and as she bent towards him he glimpsed the black lace edge of her brassiere. 'Get the nurse.'

'Is the pain too bad?'

He shook his head. 'I need a cold spoon.'

She traced the direction of his stare and sat up. 'Charlotte was right about you *yanquis*.'

'How is . . . Charlotte?'

'She has lit a candle for you in the cathedral, and prays for you constantly.'

'Nothing like . . . martyrdom to turn on . . . a Catholic.'

'And you've cornered the market.' She looked at her watch. 'I have to get to work. People to see, bodies to count.' She kissed him softly on the lips. 'Still need that cold spoon?'

'Too late . . . now.'

She grinned. 'I'll be back this evening. If it's too bad, I'll get them to splint it for you.'

He watched her as she put her bag over her shoulder and stood up to leave. He called to her. She stopped and turned in the doorway. 'I can't . . . just forget them.'

'You don't have to,' she said. 'I never asked you to do that.'

'Then how?'

'You don't have to choose, John. You don't have to give them up. I don't want that. But your life's not a sealed box. There's room in there for me as well. I'm willing to share.' She hesitated. 'Thanks, by the way.'

'What for?'

'You saved my life.'

After she had gone, he stared for a long time at the white

acoustic tiles on the ceiling, his mind floating. For once it drifted on a calm and flat sea, the long storm abated. 'And you saved mine,' he said aloud, and for once he knew that tomorrow might after all be a brighter day.

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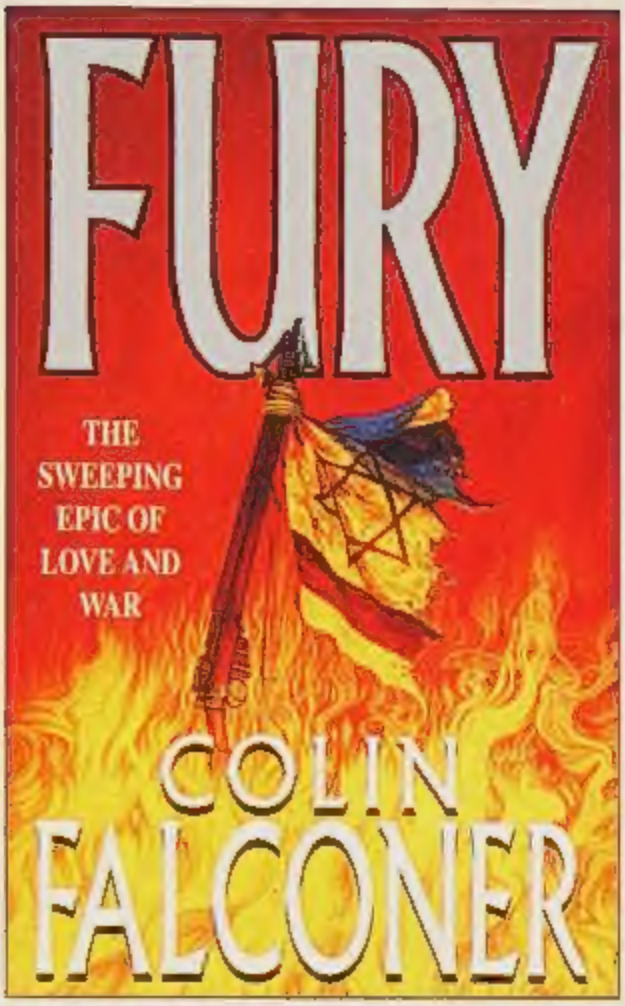
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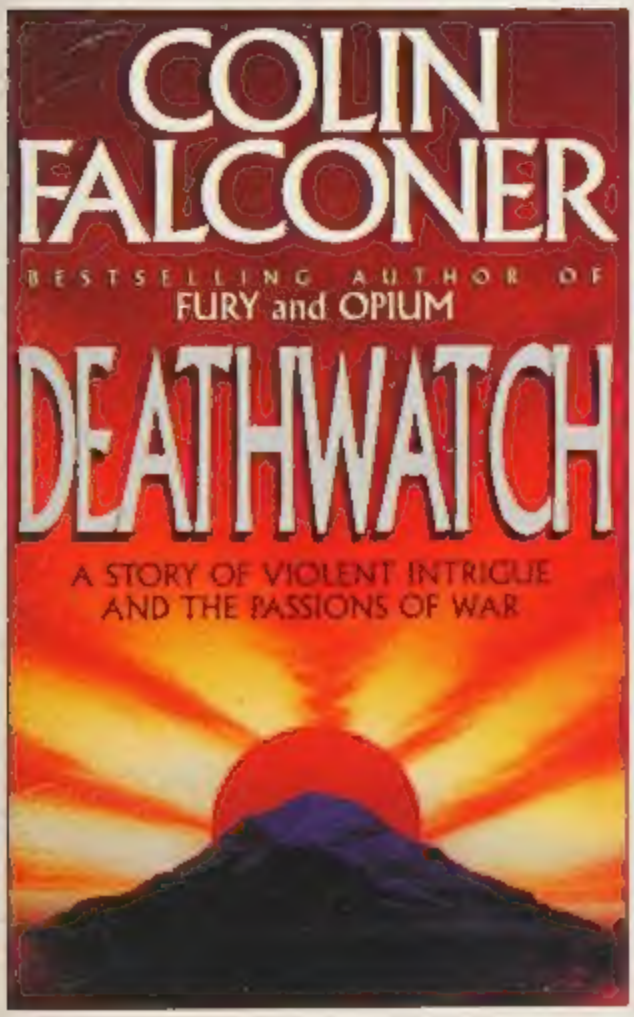
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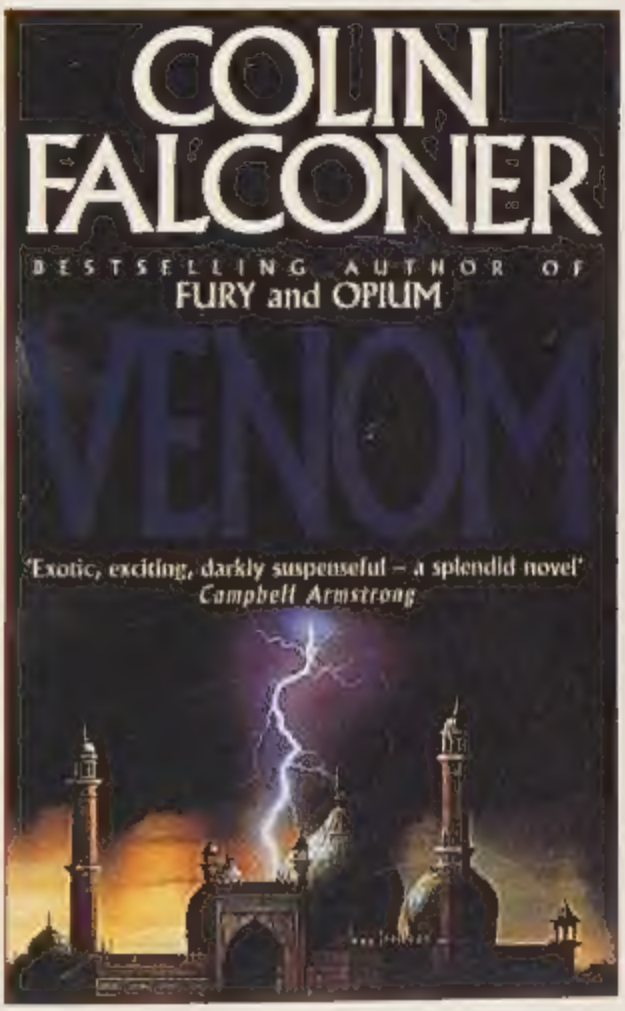
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TRIAD

Madeleine Lacey is a Detective Inspector in Hong Kong's Serious Crimes Squad. She's young, she's sexy, she's tough – and she's married to her job.

For DEA agent John Keelan, the battle against crime is more personal. Back in California, his wife and daughter were horribly murdered by a mafia drug baron.

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